

Monster Tamer: Volume 5

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Monster Tamer 5

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5



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Table of Contents

Cover

Chapter 1: The Wind Blowing through the North

Chapter 2: The Girl in My Dreams, the You Right Here

Chapter 3: Reaching Out toward Happiness

Chapter 4: Leaving Fort Tilia Behind

Chapter 5: The Knight and the Savior

Chapter 6: The Reclamation Village's Public Bath ~Katou
Mana's POV~

Chapter 7: The White Spider and the Otaku ~Gerbera's POV~

Chapter 8: The White Spider and the Puppet's Clothes
~Gerbera's POV~

Chapter 9: The White Spider and the Girl Who Continues
Marching Forward ~Gerbera's POV~

Chapter 10: The Road to the Trade City

Chapter 11: The Boy Who Seeks Strength ~Kaneki Mikihiko's
POV~

Chapter 12: Tranquil Times in the Suburbs

Chapter 13: Notice of a Sudden Change

Chapter 14: To Each Their Own Path

Chapter 15: A Small Thorn in the Journey

Chapter 16: A Beast's Confession

Chapter 17: The Wind Blowing from Serrata ~Iino Yuna's
POV~

Chapter 18: The Sprinting Girl

Chapter 19: How to Defeat a Hero

Color Illustrations

[Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

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Chapter 1: The Wind Blowing through the North

I kicked off the ground, driving my body forward. I dashed through the obstacle-ridden forest, weaving through lines of trees to my left and right. I could feel the wind brushing against my cheek, born from my sprinting rather than any natural source.

This wind was one only I could feel. The air pressure felt like it was blowing me backward, even though I was moving forward. I was moving fast, abnormally so, but I accepted this abnormality as a part of me. I couldn't protect the things I wanted to unless I did. So I ran. I simply continued running. I used the burning emotions inside me as fuel and kicked off the ground hard enough to blow my own body away.

Before long, I saw the enormous fortress called Fort Ebenus. It was one of humanity's bridgeheads against the constant threat of monsters from the Woodlands, a special forest rich with mana that constantly encroached from the south.

It looked the same as when I had left the place. I was happy to see it unchanged, and maybe...that was exactly why I found *that* to be so unforgivable. I soothed the resentment building within me and ran the remaining kilometers to the fortress.



"H-Huh? Isn't that...Iino? You're back?!"

It had been several minutes since I'd been ushered into the fortress. I couldn't exactly run through a building filled with people, but I still strode quickly down its corridors as several acquaintances greeted me. All of them were my comrades, members of the exploration team.

Around four months ago, we had been hurled into this incomprehensible world. We'd found ourselves deep inside a forest isolated from human society, where logically impossible monsters bore their fangs at us.

Until that day, we had lived our lives in peace. But in this new world, with no means to defend ourselves, all we could do was die. We only survived because, for some reason, some of us had obtained powers that defied common sense upon coming to this world. We

called these powers cheats. We used them to fend off the monsters and protect our powerless comrades, standing tall so that everyone could be at ease and find a way to live.

That was how the exploration team had been formed. I'd been a member ever since its inception, and I had thrown myself into the front lines of battle. Among the almost three hundred cheaters, my powers were considerably strong. I was the fastest in the exploration team, a force that already prided itself on overwhelming physical abilities. The Skanda, Iino Yuna—that was my identity.

As I continued down the corridors, other members of the exploration team called out to me.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Where’s that idiot Watanabe? What about Juumonji?”

“We haven’t gotten any word from Fort Tilia, so we were kinda worried here...”

Without stopping, I said, “Sorry, I need to talk to the pres— I mean, our leader about that. He’ll probably fill you in on the details later.”

I walked past the people talking to me and hurried on toward my destination. The members of the exploration team had been given the use of several rooms within Fort Ebenus. I was headed for our leader’s room. I suppressed my urge to run and shuffled my way quickly through the corridors.

“H-Hang on, Iino! Our leader’s got guests right now,” the schoolboy hot on my heels said. His name was Kouzu Asahi.

I knit my brows. “Sorry, Kouzu. This guest of his is probably Count Someone-or-other or a servant for Viscount This-or-that from the Empire come to give their greetings or whatever, right? Now’s not the time for that stuff.”

“N-No. That’s not who they are...”

We arrived at the room in question. The door was so high-class one wouldn’t think we were in a military complex. It was proof of how courteously they treated our leader here, in no way inferior to the officers of the fortress.

I sensed people on the other side of the door, but before I could put my hand on the knob, it opened from within. A man, nearly two meters tall, stood on the other side. He wasn’t who I was looking for. This was presumably the guest Kouzu had been talking about. The man gave off a solemn air, as if he were the fortress itself. He looked somewhere just over thirty years old. His shoulders were broad, and he had a well-trained, bulky body. The dignified armor he wore was different from those worn by the Imperial Knights and soldiers stationed here.

I was a little surprised that his facial features resembled ours. I

had heard somewhere before that this world was only populated by what we would call Caucasians. However, his deeply chiseled features somewhat resembled a Japanese man. He almost looked like he was of mixed blood, if that makes more sense. He looked down at me with hazel eyes, but his tidy short hair was a familiar black.

He was accompanied by another large man. This one was bald with dark skin, lighter than what we would see in our world, but unusual for a local. At the very least, I had never seen this skin color at Fort Ebenus or Fort Tilia. Differences in bone structure and skin color could just be a matter of individuality here, though.

In any case, the reason I had the time to observe the two men like this was because they had also come to a stop to observe me. A pair of hazel eyes were staring at me from beneath thick eyebrows. It wasn't the look of a vulgar man eying a woman—if it had been, I would've planted my fist right into his rock-like face—but more like he was evaluating my very being.

His eyes reminded me of my dad, who worked as a police officer—something I was very proud of him for. This was the gaze he gave me whenever I did something bad as a child. That somehow nostalgic severity caused me to wince.

“Excuse me, milady.”

Seeing that I'd jumped back and opened the way, the man put his hand to his chest and politely bowed to me. He finally averted his eyes, and I let out the breath I'd been unconsciously holding. Then the man with the terrifying and solemn presence left down the corridor. As I watched his back, a voice beside me brought me back to my senses.

“What are you doing back here?”

A tall girl wearing a school uniform was standing by the door's entrance.

“Kuriyama...”

Kuriyama Moeko. She was one year older than me and worked as an assistant and bodyguard for the exploration team's leader. Her clever eyes beneath frameless glasses looked at me and Kouzu in turn.

“And what do you think *you're* doing here, Kouzu? I believe I gave you a job to do?” she said.

“Oh, uh, er...”

“Well?”

“Sorry, I'll get right back to it.”

Kuriyama drove Kouzu away with a cold gaze, then turned my way. I actually felt kind of bad for him, but I kept it to myself.

“Tino, aren't you supposed to be at Fort Tilia rescuing the survivors of the Colony? I seem to remember you were going to stay there and assist with rescue missions until another order came.”

“Y-Yes, I was. I just came back. I have something to tell our leader, so could you let me through?”

I wasn't really good at dealing with this older girl. Back in our world, she was very talented and had terrific grades. She had been aiming to attend the medical department of a relevant national university and succeed in her family business. She was actually very smart and often covered for our leader's tendency to skim on the details. Still, she felt really cold to me.

I suddenly noticed the thoughts going through my mind and chided myself. I couldn't do this. She was a fellow member of the exploration team. She was a brave comrade who had decided to journey east to protect everyone from our school. Above all else, our leader recognized her abilities and kept her by his side. That was enough for me to regard her as one of the most trustworthy people there was. He surely saw a virtue in her that I couldn't. Well, even if there was one, I'd probably still have problems dealing with her.

“That voice... Is that you, Iino?” I was a little relieved to hear a boy's voice come from within the room. “Let her in, Moeko. I have a bunch of things I want to ask her about.”

“Very well. Please come in, Iino.”

Kuriyama stepped aside and let me in. I walked through the door, remaining conscious of her presence behind me. There was a short table with a pair of sofas facing each other in the corner of the spacious room. The guests had presumably been sitting right there just moments ago. Our leader, Nakajima Kojirou, was still seated on one of the sofas.

He was a very handsome boy, even from my perspective as someone who was used to seeing him. He had a sweet face that looked like it belonged in an idol group. He had a determined brow, and he wore clothing from this world around his tight, tall body.

Some of the exploration team wore these clothes, while others remained in uniform. I was one of the latter, simply because it was more comfortable to wear. On the other hand, our leader liked how easy it was to slip on these clothes, so he had gotten rid of his uniform along with all his other belongings.

He was declaring his intent to assimilate, in his own little way. Considering his position, he had to meet important people from this world and their messengers all the time. Several of the guys in the exploration team imitated him in this regard. The day before I left for Fort Tilia, I had been chatting with my friends about how stupid boys could be. Of course, we didn't dislike them for it.

“I'm glad you made it back, Iino. Everyone has been worried about you.”

He stood up from the sofa and walked toward me. That was all it

took to change the atmosphere in the room. Just hearing his voice brought me a sense of relief. I guess this was what people called charisma. I realized I had lost my focus and rebuked myself.

“Sorry, I couldn’t contact you, Prez— I mean, Leader.”

“You can call me Prez if you want, you know.”

It had been quite some time since we’d had this talk. We had both been part of the same kendo club back in our world. Our activities had of course been divided by gender, but we’d still socialized as a junior and senior from the same club.

Thinking back on it, he might’ve been different from the other students even back in those days. If not for him, we would’ve scattered within days of coming to this world. This even applied to me back then.

I’d had these incredible powers ever since the very first day. I had tried to protect everyone from the monsters attacking us, but that wasn’t good enough. And it was our leader who had given me a true purpose.

Only around a hundred people had been self-aware of their cheats at the time. They had all wandered around the area on their own and encountered monsters many times over. We should’ve been more careful. We weren’t an organized group yet, and we had no combat experience. We were just a bunch of kids teleported here from Japan. And we hadn’t had the leisure to think things over that much.

“This is hopeless! Let’s get out of here, Yu!”

“That’s not true, Todo! That’s not... No way... You’re kidding me.”

The tumult of battle had attracted more monsters. Then that battle with the new monsters had attracted even more monsters. Before we knew it, things looked hopeless. At the time, I could already run abnormally fast, faster than anyone. I was also used to swinging a sword thanks to my experience in the kendo club. Regardless, even I had despaired.

I could have escaped on my own, but the monsters were pushing toward hundreds of powerless students. It was obvious even to the untrained eye that I wouldn’t be able to protect them all. The future had looked hopeless, and I had been stricken with grief over my own powerlessness.

I knew that no matter what I did, I wouldn’t have been able to accomplish anything. Still, I believed I had to fight. I forced my weakened legs to run at the monsters. However, just then, *he* arrived with a force of cheaters in tow. He faced the monsters of the Depths, charging his way through them with his shining golden sword in hand, the blade born of his inherent ability. He had then tapped my shoulder as I trembled before the tragic events to come.

“Take pride in yourself, Iino Yuna. No matter who might deny it, even

if you don't admit it yourself, I will always acknowledge the value behind your intentions. And that doesn't just apply to Iino. Is this all the rest of you are really worth? Do you think it's over already? I won't accept that. I won't accept a 'game over' like this! Never give up! After me!"

Wielding his golden sword, which had already attracted attention, he had lured the monsters toward him and away from the powerless students far to the rear. What had followed was a furious display of vigor and a stream of glorious achievements. Using his tremendous power, sound judgment, and—above all else—his unyielding heart, he had gone on to defeat far more monsters than anyone else. Whenever the other students found themselves in dire straits, he had covered for them. At the time, only fifty people had participated, but by his efforts alone, our power had multiplied several times over.

By the time the battle ended, he had naturally become our core. That was when, by his suggestion, the exploration team had taken form. We'd only had fifty members at first, but more and more had gradually joined. We protected the students who couldn't fight and began constructing temporary housing in the forest—the Colony. We had continued to light the path toward survival here in this world.

Even with power, we had been nothing but a disorderly mob of students. He had been the one to bring us together—Our hero, the Sword of Light, Nakajima Kojirou.



“Honestly speaking, it's good that you've come,” our leader said as we sat facing each other on the guest sofas. “Quite a lot of time has passed since we lost contact with Fort Tilia. When the magical communication technology they use stops working, information travels way too slow. On the other hand, with the Skanda out there, there was no point in imprudently sending over more people. I almost wanted to go out there myself, though.”

“That would be a problem, Captain,” Kuriyama said, standing behind him. “You need to stay and strengthen the foundation of the students here.”

“As you can see...Moeko has been quite noisy about it. Since I can't get away from here, it's rather helpful that you came back.”

“Even if it didn't help you, isn't it fortunate that she returned at this time?” Kuriyama asked.

“Oh, you're right. There's that too. I'm glad you made it in time.”

“Hang on. Wait a sec. What exactly are you talking about?” I said, cutting into their conversation. “Oh. Now that I think of it, I didn't see many members on my way here. Do they all have something to do all of a sudden? Some kind of big scale clean-up operation?”

I'd made a conjecture based on what he'd said. The last time I was

here, the exploration team had undertaken the job of suppressing the monsters in the region.

It was customary for the church in the capital, located in the northern region of the Empire, to invite those from other worlds to come visit. However, the exploration team hadn't taken them up on their offer. We couldn't go all the way to the capital when we had to rescue the students left behind in the Colony. It wasn't like the exploration team had unanimously agreed, but our leader had decided that we would stay in Fort Ebenus. But since we couldn't just sit around doing nothing while we stayed here, we were holding back the monsters in the region. So of course our leader would be glad that the Skanda made it back in time for a major operation.

"Did those two guests have something to do with this? They didn't seem like ordinary people."

"They would surely be pleased to hear such praise from the Skanda. In any case, you're half right. It's related to them, but it has nothing to do with some operation."

"So..."

"They're knights from the Holy Order. You've at least heard of them, right?"

"The Holy Order...? The strongest military force, the one that fights alongside the saviors?"

"Yeah. They got tired of waiting, so they finally came to check us out directly. The commander himself at that."

"Check us out?"

"It's one of their jobs. They need to ascertain whether any saviors who appeared are the real deal."

I recalled the man's gaze. Those hazel eyes had been measuring my very being. So that was what it was about... It honestly didn't feel very good, but to the people of this world, visitors from afar held the very fate of humanity in their hands. I could understand why they'd want to ascertain whether we were the real thing.

"Anyway, they said they were just here to check. So that interview just ended. I'm glad it went off without a hitch."

"We definitely came from another world, so that's pretty much obvious, but I guess it's good nothing bad came of it."

"You're right...but it'll be harder for us to stay here any longer."

"Meaning...you accepted their invitation to go to the capital?"

"Yeah. Seems like it's pretty troublesome for them that we haven't gone yet. Something to do with politics, but I don't really get that stuff. Still, we can't just keep ignoring them when they're taking care of us like this. So, the exploration team will leave Fort Ebenus."

Our leader frowned as he explained the situation. He obviously had mixed feelings about it.

“It’s just, well, it seems their plans were sorta thrown off. We’ve been here in Ebenus for nearly two months. Considering how it takes over a month to get here from the capital, it makes sense that they were a little late in coming here.”

“Late?” I asked as I cocked my head.

“There are sixty-three members of the exploration team here right now,” Kuriyama answered. “That’s around half of the expedition force. They’re all preparing to leave the fortress. The others are no longer here.”

“No longer here...? So where’d they go?”

“Who knows? Maybe the capital, maybe somewhere else,” she answered indifferently.

I understood what she was implying, but I needed a moment to process it.

“You’re telling me we have deserters?!” I asked, unintentionally pitching myself forward.

“That’s not quite it, Iino,” our leader replied, shaking his head. “They departed of their own will. We’re not here out of obligation. When we got sent here, we had to fight just to get through that crisis. Calling them ‘deserters’ disregards our feelings from that time.”

“I-I know, but...”

“We struggled so much to reach this stage. Isn’t it natural for some to want to live as they like from now on? I’m happy to see them all off and wish them the best in their future endeavors. Besides, I was just acting willful, saying we needed to save the ones left behind in the Colony. Just like how I act by my own will, they can live as they want by theirs.”

It really was like him. He respected everyone’s will. Perhaps this was how he had led over a hundred students on a journey with no end in sight, bringing us so far. I couldn’t say anything else on this topic.

“Put another way,” Kuriyama added, “you could say the dissidents are gone now, right?” She paid no mind when I scrunched my face and kept going. “The only ones left are those who share the captain’s ideals. I believe this applies to you as well, doesn’t it Iino?”

“She’s right. I’d like you to come along with us to the capital, Iino. I can’t force you to, of course...but I’d be glad if you did.”

“I...”

I hesitated for a moment. However, my heart was already decided. I knew what I had to do before I even got here.

“Sorry, Leader. I can’t go with you.”

“I see. May I ask why? Actually, before that, I still haven’t heard about what happened at Fort Tilia.”

“I’ll explain, but in short, there’s someone I have to go catch,” I said, clenching my fists tightly. “While I was headed to the Depths

with the Imperial Knights to save any survivors, monsters attacked Fort Tilia. A lot of people died. They're saying someone who came from our world did it. I can't forgive them for that. I'll definitely make them face the judgment of the law."

"I see... So Fort Tilia really was..."

Our leader's eyes widened slightly as he listened to my story. However, he had probably already guessed something like this had happened based on the loss of contact with Fort Tilia. He didn't react any further.

"So?" he urged.

"I'm thinking of leaving the fortress right away to pursue the culprit."

"The culprit, huh? Do you know who did it?"

"Information on it seems to be hit or miss. I haven't been able to meet the Alliance Knights who are aware of what happened. However, I've heard the names of two definitive suspects. One is Kudou Riku, but unfortunately, his whereabouts are unknown. It seems he's hiding himself in the Woodlands..."

"The Woodlands are vast. I suppose you'll leave him for later. So you're chasing after the other suspect?"

"Yes," I answered with a nod. I suppressed the resentment in my heart as I practically chewed on his name. "It's Majima Takahiro. I'm thinking of pursuing him from here."

Chapter 2: The Girl in My Dreams, the You Right Here

“Wanna come stargazing?”

That was how Kaneki Mikihiko, my friend since middle school, had invited me out. It was April, and we’d just become high school students. The local science museum was holding a stargazing party at school that evening. This was one of several events to help us get to know each other at our new school, taking advantage of the starry night sky during the weekend. There were over thirty participants and two teachers. Fortunately, both Mikihiko and I had won the raffle to attend, so we were able to take part.

That evening, we all gathered on the roof of the school. We started by learning about the stars. I was just there because I’d been invited, so I didn’t really have much interest to begin with. Actually, neither did many of the participants, but the event organizers seemed to be aware of this, so their explanations were quite well thought-out and amusing.

After that, we got to actually look through a telescope at the moon and other planets. We were tasked to find designated celestial bodies. We used the timer on a digital camera to take pictures of the stars, and the teachers in charge berated the students who were goofing off and getting in the way of the picture.

It was an extraordinary—yet completely ordinary—scene out of our everyday lives. So why was it that something was swelling within my heart? It was supposedly my first time seeing the school roof, but it felt nostalgic. This was the world we lived in. I didn’t even need to confirm it. I shouldn’t have needed to, at least.

And yet...it all felt so terribly far away. Everything I was trying not to remember inadvertently overflowed from the recesses of my mind. The emotions I had packed and sealed away were about to burst out. But I couldn’t shed any tears.

Once I realized I was experiencing emotions that I hadn’t felt at that time, my dream crumbled easily. I figured out this was a memory buried deep in my mind. Even if I hadn’t realized that, this dream was about to end anyway. The world was vanishing little by little from the edge of my vision.

I couldn’t see the stars anymore. And just then, one of the girls standing on the rooftop turned my way. She had a beautiful face.

Now that's high school for you. There's even a cute girl like that around. I remembered being weirdly surprised when the participants had gathered. She was in a different class than me, and we didn't really have anything in common, so I wasn't likely to ever talk to her.

But as our eyes met, she smiled. The moonlight poured down on her thin fluttering hair, turning it almost white—and my vision blacked out.



“Oh, Master. Are you awake?”

The first thing I saw upon waking was Lily turning my way, wearing a school uniform and sitting on the end of my bed. The light from the morning sun was just coming through the window, illuminating her flaxen hair. It stood out in the gloomy room. The sunlight made it look almost transparent. It was like a scene right out of a painting.

“Morning, Master.”

Our eyes met, and Lily gave me an affectionate and sweet smile. For an instant, it felt like her smile overlapped with an image I had seen once before.

“Hm? What's up?”

“Nothing, it's just...” I got out of bed and pressed my hand against my forehead. “I had a nostalgic dream...I think.”

The vague sensation particular to dreams already felt so far away. All I could feel within my sluggish thoughts was a strange sense of *déjà vu*.

“A dream? What kind?” Lily asked, blinking curiously. “A bad dream?”

She stretched her fingers out and touched my forehead. They were slightly cold but had a familiar warmth. This was Lily. Of course it was. That was obvious.

I gave her a slight smile. “No, not really. Anyway, I see you're back.”

“Oh, yup,” Lily said as she withdrew her hand and nodded. “I just got here. I'm taking a bit of a break.”

“Where's everyone else?” I asked.

“Rose was here just a moment ago, but she switched with me to go see Katou. After she helped me some, Gerbera took a nap over here, but she got up a little earlier. She said she was going to take a walk with Ayame.”

“A walk...? Is that going to be okay?”

“You're such a worrywart.” Lily's lips slackened in both exasperation and affection. Realizing I had started scowling before I knew it, I felt a little awkward about it. “It's okay. I'm a little worried

about Ayame too, but I told Gerbera to keep an eye on her.”

“That so? Thanks.”

“You’re going to be heading out too, right? Get changed. I’ll go ask for breakfast.”

With that, Lily left the room. I started getting dressed in the meantime. I took off my sleepwear and stretched my arm out toward the clothing Gerbera had made for me; they sat folded by my side. A vine shot out of the back of my hand and pulled them toward me.

“Thanks, Asarina.”

“Massster!”

My plan for the day was to get changed, eat breakfast, and then meet Shiran and ask about the current situation. Two days had passed since another monster tamer, Kudou Riku, had manipulated an army of monsters into attacking Fort Tilia, where ten students—including myself—had been staying.

After that incident, I had been given the use of an entire floor within the residential area of the fortress. All of my servants, including Rose and Gerbera, were staying there with me. Even though some areas of the fortress had been destroyed, because there had been so many casualties, there were more than enough rooms to spare for us.

Three military organizations had been stationed in Fort Tilia: the Imperial Southern Army, the Second Company of the Imperial Knights, and the Third Company of the Alliance Knights. Currently, the fortress was housing around three hundred survivors from the Imperial Southern Army, fifty from the Alliance Knights, and about a hundred noncombatants. Except for the knights who had accompanied Iino Yuna into the Depths to rescue more students, the Second Company of the Imperial Knights had been wiped out during Juumonji’s betrayal. Considering how Fort Tilia had once been packed with over two thousand personnel, the losses were catastrophic.

In a war among humans, there might’ve been the option to surrender and avoid such casualties. But against monsters, and in a siege with nowhere to run, the damage had been catastrophic.

Among the students staying at the fortress, the main culprit behind the incident, Juumonji Tatsuya; his accomplice, Sakagami Gouta; the exploration team’s Watanabe Yoshiki; and eight members of the Colony’s home team had all died. The only survivors were myself, Mikihiko, Miyoshi Taichi, Miyoshi Taichi’s three friends, Iino Yuna—who wasn’t likely to return from the Depths for a while—and Kudou Riku.

“Hey, Senpai. Want to join forces with me?”

That day, I’d refused the hand of my fellow tamer. If I hadn’t, I would have been abandoning everything I’d held on to so dearly up

until now and turning into the same kind of monster he had become. I knew this, but just as he'd said, he had no intention of giving up on me. We were sure to meet again. How would he appear before me next time? What would happen to me then? I couldn't even imagine it right now.

"What's wrong, Master?"

Before I knew it, Lily had returned. She was holding a tray with what appeared to be emergency rations—chopped root vegetables and meat all jumbled up into some sort of gruel. She set the tray down atop a round table near the window and looked at me curiously. I then noticed my hands had come to a complete stop.

"O-Oh, sorry. I just kinda zoned out."

I laughed it off and sealed away the vague anxiety I felt about my future. I quickly finished changing and sat down in the chair across from Lily. There was one portion in front of me.

"You're not eating?" I asked with a cock of my head.

"Geez. Are you still asleep, Master? I've had plenty to eat already, remember? Didn't I tell you I came back for a break?"

Lily gave her stomach a good slap. I found myself looking down, but I immediately averted my gaze. Even if we were in private, she was still a girl. It wasn't good to stare too much.

"Oh yeah, you did... How's the cleanup going?"

"Hmmm. From yesterday to today? About a third done or so?"

Rose had been my guard from last night until this morning while Lily worked on a job only she could do. Fort Tilia had managed to overcome an unprecedented crisis, but the survivors had no time to rest at all because of having to deal with the aftermath.

The upper brass in charge of the fortress had all been part of the hastily constructed counteroffensive plan, and they'd been completely wiped out by Juumonji's magic when he unveiled his true nature. Little by little, the commander of the Alliance Knights was taking charge and dealing with the cleanup, but the biggest problem was the staggering number of deceased soldiers.

The Woodlands were rich with mana. Corpses left at large here were liable to turn into ghouls. If they weren't dealt with within a few days, Fort Tilia could be torn apart by the living dead from the inside out, even though it had already overcome one major crisis.

Even if that didn't happen, the corpses would rot if left at large, and that could lead to disease. That was their priority for now, but there were more than just human corpses. Monsters who had surged through the fortress during the attack were laying dead all over the place.

I had asked the knights to allow me to help with that. There were a few reasons we wanted to handle this work, but the major reason

was based on information we had gotten from Kudou. In this world, one could gain mana by defeating other beings who also possessed mana. Incidentally, this wasn't necessarily limited to monsters either. In addition, according to Kudou, eating the meat of the fallen was more efficient than simply killing them. That was why Kudou had retrieved the corpses of the students who had large amounts of mana. This law applied to eating monsters too.

Suffice it to say, there was plenty to gain by dealing with all the monster corpses ourselves, and Lily had the best aptitude for doing so.

She was a slime. Her very nature was predation. She had been playing up hitting her belly, but with her undefined biology, there was nothing in her like a stomach that limited how much she could eat. With no limit, she could get that much stronger. Furthermore, she was a mimic slime. She could mimic the abilities of all the monsters she ate.

In any case, that was why I had asked Lily to clean up all the monsters. I had also asked Gerbera to transport the corpses to the room Lily was using for this. The fact that Gerbera was out right now taking a walk meant that she had reached a good point to take a break.

"So a third, huh? It's going quicker than I thought," I said.

"I'm prioritizing the ones that rot over time, and they happen to digest faster too."

"I see."

I had accompanied Lily partway through her work yesterday. I recalled all the monsters I'd seen during that time. A slime's ability to digest and absorb matter was a part of their specialty as monsters. However, it did take some time depending on matters such as compatibility. We had avoided engaging monsters as much as we could two days ago, instead prioritizing dealing with the cheaters. There were multiple monsters we hadn't seen before who looked like they would take a while to digest. For example, there were doll-like clay mud golems, dark-red fire elementals who were amalgamations of polyhedrons, large steel ants with metallic shells, and enormous armored tortoises.

"Well, I'll probably be done within a few days," Lily said.

"I see. Then please focus on that a while longer. I'm sure it's troublesome with how many there are..."

"It's fine. It's not really troublesome. This is the first time since I've been born that I've gotten so much to eat. Actually, it's kinda..."

Lily licked her lips. Her red tongue was seductive. I inadvertently stopped my spoon halfway up to my mouth.

"Hey, Master...?" she said with a charming smile. "I'm, you know, a slime, right? It's normal for me to eat, grow bigger, and split apart

to multiply.”

“Yeah. What about it? Actually, Lily, what’s with you? You seem kind of...”

Lily seemed strangely erotic. I faltered somewhat, and Lily shook her head at me.

“Nothing really. I’m normal. Yup, this is normal... I mean, eating means multiplying. And multiplying, means *multiplying*.”

In other words, Lily’s original biology as a slime had an influence on her disposition as a mimicked girl. She rose to her feet and leaned over the small table. Her slightly flushed and adorable face drew closer as her fingers touched my cheek. Her sweet scent tickled my nose. This adorable invasion of personal space was a special right only she possessed.

“Master...”

Lily’s entrancing smile was right in front of my face, and I gulped.

“What are you trying to get me to do first thing in the morning?” I said, flicking her forehead.

“Owie.”

Lily sat back down, holding her forehead. I looked at her with bleary eyes.

“I’m going to see Shiran today. I don’t have the time to laze around.”

“Kaaaay...”

Lily kept holding her forehead as she prostrated herself over the table, even though it was bad manners to do so. Looking down at her acting so defenseless, I secretly felt relieved.

That was close. Just a little more and I would’ve gone with it... It was a little frightening that there was a part of me that regretted that I hadn’t. If I remained here any longer, that spark in my chest might just ignite at any moment. I quickly gulped down the rest of my breakfast and rose from my seat.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Mm, fine... Hey, Master?”

She was being surprisingly docile. She remained prostrated over the table, looking up at me only by moving her eyes. I put myself on guard for what was to come.

“If you’ve ever got something worrying you, you know you can depend on me any time you want, right?”

Just then, I suddenly realized that my anxieties about Kudou had faded away while I was having such a silly conversation with her.

“Lily...”

She smiled gently at me. I really was no match for her. That was what I honestly thought when I saw her smile.

“I know,” I said, scratching my head.

I held my hand out to her. Her smile deepened, and she took my hand to stand up. I didn't stop there, however. Things weren't very well balanced if I was the one getting played with all the time. I tugged on her hand.

"Whoa!"

She didn't seem to expect this, so I was able to catch her more easily than I'd expected. With my beloved in my arms, I soaked in her sweet body heat and tenderness. It made me feel like a simpleton, but I didn't think that was a bad thing, not in the least.

"Now then, shall we get going?" I asked.

"Mm."

We exchanged smiles and left the room together.



Members of the Alliance Knights were stationed on the floor we were using at all times. After we exited our room, Lily and I asked one of the knights in the corridor to escort us to where Shiran was.

We proceeded down the barren hallways. The imposing stone walls had crumbled here and there, and broken fragments lay every few steps. They hadn't had the time to deal with this stuff yet.

"Oh yeah," Lily said on the way. "Rose mentioned something before leaving the room. There's something she wants from you, Master."

"What is it?"

"She'd like to see more kinds of runestones."

Runestones were special stones capable of manifesting magic-like phenomena such as creating water or light. Each was carved in a unique way depending on its use. Some required special training to use, but fundamentally, they operated with mana and didn't necessarily require that the user have any magical skill. However, it seemed their effects were rather limited. Furthermore, excluding the simple runestones that were in common circulation, there were barely any artisans left capable of carving them, and those made by such artisans were extremely expensive. Depending on the type, some were held under lock and key, never to leave their vaults. There were also runestones whose manufacturing methods had been lost, like the barrier runestones that protected those huts in the Depths.

"More runestones...? Oh yeah, she did look pretty interested in them."

When the attack on Fort Tilia had been settled with Juumonji's death and Kudou's escape, Rose had returned to the fortress with us. She showed great interest in the technology she was seeing for the very first time. As a magical puppet who created magic tools, unknown technologies roused her interest. She had apparently

detached the illumination runestone in her room and investigated it.

“She wants to see types other than the illumination runestone. If possible, she also wanted to see some before they were carved too.”

“Unprocessed runestones? Is she planning to try and make some herself?”

“She wants to try, but she said she didn’t mind even if she can just take a look. There’s some other things she’s apparently curious about.”

“That’s awfully vague coming from Rose.”

“Seems like she’s not entirely sure herself. Actually, isn’t it because she’s not sure that she wants to ask you and check a bunch of things?”

That made sense. I gave Lily a nod. “Okay, I’ll ask after our talks with Shiran are over.”

“Mm. Please do.”

As we chatted, we reached the room at the end of the corridor. We thanked the knight who’d accompanied us and were about to enter the room when several knights came out. The girl who saw them off then turned our way. Her blonde hair was tied up in a ponytail, revealing her pointy ears, and she was wearing an eyepatch. The elven girl, who now only had one blue eye, spotted Lily and I standing there.

“You’re here, Takahiro. Good morning to you.”

“Morning, Shiran. You seem busy.”

After exchanging greetings, I settled down next to Lily on the chair Shiran guided us to.

“Nothing of the sort. The commander is far busier than I am. I just finished passing out the orders for the day. How is your condition?”

“The fatigue has passed. How about you?”

“Thank you for your concern. There haven’t been any particular inconveniences as of yet.”

Shiran smiled, but I didn’t feel relieved. Both Shiran and I had surmounted the same carnage, teetering between life and death, but our circumstances were different. She’d been killed in the battle two days ago, after all. It wasn’t really a matter of teetering for her; she had fallen completely to death’s side. After that, she had awakened as an undead monster through her own tremendous willpower. Though just a mindless ghoul, she had regained her self-consciousness and was now able to smile just as she did now.

The Tragedy of the Undead King Carl told of a powerful undead monster called a lich who’d maintained a sense of reason while still being a king. It was currently treated as nothing more than a fairy tale, but Shiran’s existence proved it might’ve been true. She was currently somewhere between a lich and a ghoul...a demilich, so to speak. There was no precedent for this, so a follow-up inspection was

necessary.

“There is no need to worry. As you can see, I can even call out the sprite now.” She pointed up to a little ball floating above her that resembled a doll a child would make out of clay.



There were those among the elves who could convene with spirits, an ability unique to their race. They were called spiritualists. Shiran was one such spiritualist, and the little ball floating above her was a spirit she had made a contract with. Right after turning into a demilich, she had said that she couldn't call for the spirits due to the instability of her mana, but just two days later, she had apparently regained their use. Such abilities were indicative of her title as the strongest knight in the northern Woodlands.

"Although, I'm embarrassed to say that calling one of them out is the best I can do, and it doesn't look like I can ask it to search the area. I'll need to adjust gradually regarding this matter."

"So long as things are okay... Let me know if anything comes up. There might be something I can help with."

Shiran retained the personality she'd had in life even as an undead monster. But though she was a monster with a will, her circumstances differed from the other girls, and there was no way I could call her my servant. However, at the same time, her very being was of the same nature as theirs. It was possible I could help in some way if a problem occurred.

She was my servant, yet she wasn't. Still, my desire to help her was just as strong as it was toward all the others. That was how dearly I thought of this noble girl.

"Thank you very much," Shiran said, giving me a wide smile before cutting to the chase. "So, am I right to assume you've come today to hear about the current situation in the fortress?"

"Yeah. According to what the commander mentioned the day before yesterday, they were still deciding on the plans up until today. Could you fill me in on the details?"

"Understood." Shiran nodded, then began telling us about the situation. "First, regarding the burial of the dead. It seems this will take several days, just as we expected. The army is mostly in charge of handling this, but seeing how resources are limited and that caution must be taken against the presence of ghouls, it's taking some time to accomplish."

"That's pretty much inevitable... Have there been any ghoul outbreaks?"

"Two bodies turned into ghouls yesterday. Both were dealt with on the spot. The Alliance Knights rushed to the site immediately, so there weren't any casualties."

"I see."

Perhaps things could've gone differently had I been there. That thought passed through my mind...but an exceptional case like Shiran's wasn't all that likely to reoccur. Plus, it wouldn't be worth

multiplying the number of casualties by trying to hold back the ghouls until I got there, only for it not to work. That would be putting the cart before the horse. Shiran was an exception. It seemed I had no choice but to give up in this regard.

“More ghouls outbreaks will occur as time passes,” Shiran continued, “so we must be rid of the corpses as quickly as possible. It vexes me that we cannot give them all a proper funeral service, though...”

“Is there anything we can help with?”

“No, that’s a little...”

Shiran trailed off, her expression dark. It seemed I had said something thoughtless.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to trouble you,” I told her.

“I should be the one to apologize. I know it is rather rude of us...”

“Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault,” I said, scratching my head awkwardly. “Besides... Right. It’s important to know the current situation. Now’s as good a time as any. Could you tell me how the survivors feel about me?”

Everyone left here knew I had the ability to tame monsters. This naturally applied to the Alliance Knights who had fought alongside us, and there were several others who had seen us as we moved through the fortress. We were well beyond the point of keeping it hidden.

The people of this world saw monsters as their greatest enemies. They had feared monsters so long that the fear had become instinctual. They were also a target of hatred and resentment for all those who had lost someone precious to them. The elven race turned out spiritualists in great numbers, and due to the belief that spirits were a subspecies of monsters, they’d been persecuted as traitors to humanity. To the people here, accepting a monster tamer would be unthinkable, and it wasn’t something that I could change in just one or two days.

As an elven spiritualist, Shiran understood this better than any other. She smiled at me sadly. “In truth, I believe many are bewildered by the situation. The ability to make companions of monsters is completely unheard of, even for the fabled saviors descended from other worlds.”

I thought of an unsteady balancing scale. Any attempt to stabilize it could send it reeling in the other direction. We couldn’t just carelessly adjust it. This was another reason I’d wanted to dispose of the monsters’ corpses. The Alliance Knights would adhere to their commander’s will, but we couldn’t work alongside the imperial soldiers. We weren’t sectioned off in the fortress and under the constant guard of the Alliance Knights because we were some sort of VIPs. They were a buffer zone between us and the soldiers, so to

speak.

“Well, in the long history of visitors from afar, only Kudou and I have had this kind of power,” I said. “I can understand why they won’t easily accept me. I had braced myself for this from the very beginning, and it’s actually going a lot better than I thought it would.”

Humans weren’t machines. They had hearts. The people of this world had their own sense of values. I couldn’t just say “when in Rome” and leave things as they were, but trying to force them to accept me would just incite chaos and potentially bring misfortune to everyone involved. It would just be selfish. At the very least, they weren’t going to interfere so long as I didn’t do anything strange. That was more than enough.

“I actually thought they’d reject me outright,” I said.

“You saved many of them following the battle, after all.”

Just as Shiran said, after we’d confirmed that Kudou was gone two days ago, we’d helped the Alliance Knights with rescue activities. Lily had used her healing magic on some of the survivors, and Gerbera had dragged some of them out of fallen debris, though they screamed the whole time.

“By defeating Juumonji Tatsuya and routing Kudou Riku, you are technically responsible for saving everyone currently in the fortress... But it seems your direct help with the rescue efforts does play a larger role. I cannot claim that none bear you animosity, but you can consider them the minority. The Alliance Knights can assist you with that. It pains me that this is all we’re capable of doing, though.”

“That’s more than enough. Now that you mention it, are there any of the Alliance Knights dissatisfied with this?”

“All members of the Third Company were selected by the commander,” Shiran said with a wry yet proud smile. “Besides, she made me, an elf, her lieutenant. Anyone who would be dissatisfied now wouldn’t be a member in the first place. Actually, thanks to that, the commander is treated as an eccentric elf-lover in some parts.”

“I see. So that’s what has both you and Mikihiko smitten, huh?”

I shrugged. Shiran smiled in agreement, then looked at me with a gentle gaze.

“Takahiro, what do you plan on doing from here?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“After the dead are buried, we are abandoning Fort Tilia.”

I gulped at this revelation. “I see. So the commander has made her decision.”

“Yes. Currently, only two-thirds of the survivors can move about properly. Only half of those can fight. Regardless of what I said earlier, if there were in fact anyone who bore you malice, everyone is exhausted to the point that they don’t have the energy to act on it.”

This world possessed a miraculous power that didn't exist in ours: healing magic. It wasn't unlimited, however. For example, Lily's grade 3 healing magic could even reattach a limb depending on the circumstances, but it couldn't reform a limb if, say, a monster had devoured it. There were many cases where it was too late for any healing, and some required rehabilitation before fighting was even worth considering. Grade 3 magic also happened to be the highest level the people of this world could possibly hope to achieve. There had only been a scant few practitioners in the fortress to begin with, including Shiran, but she had lost the ability to do so when she'd turned into an undead monster.

"Furthermore, the esteemed saviors' betrayal...especially Juumonji Tatsuya, who many of the soldiers were familiar with, was a tremendous shock. There are many who are dismayed, saying such a thing can't possibly be true."

"But it really happened."

"Yes. We Alliance Knights saw it with our own eyes, and there are several soldiers who survived the collapse at the ramparts. That's precisely why many of them are mentally overwhelmed."

Visitors from afar were treated as saviors here. They were symbols of hope, verging on religious pillars that morally supported the entire populace. The realities of this world were so harsh that people couldn't continue living if they didn't have the hope they called saviors. So when these saviors wielded their extraordinary powers *against* the people for selfish reasons, both shock and confusion were perfectly natural. It would understandably tear their hearts apart.

There was still the residual heat from the battle and the looming threat of ghoulish outbreaks, so they were somehow able to keep it together. However, we didn't know how long that could last. It was actually astounding they were able to carry out their work like this.

Much of this was probably due to the commander's abilities. She hadn't even given the soldiers the time to fall to their knees and groan. Instead, she had scolded them, saying, "And you call yourselves the vanguards who protect humanity?" At a glance, she appeared to be rather harsh, but she was getting everything underway for the evacuation while they could still move so that no further victims would arise.

"All of the fortress's facilities have been practically destroyed," Shiran continued. "It will take large-scale repairs involving thousands of people, several years, and a fully-detailed plan for reorganization. There is nothing we can do about it as we are now."

"There's no way for a hundred or so people to protect a fortress riddled with holes, you mean."

"Exactly. We've already sent out a messenger to request relief, but

it will still take three or four days for them to reach the nearest village by horse. Gathering soldiers and organizing the army will take even more time than that before they can be dispatched. Staying here any longer will only increase the number of casualties for no purpose whatsoever.”

“Hence the evacuation.”

Shiran nodded as a shadow of sorrow fell over her. Up until now, she had been putting her life on the line fighting at Fort Tilia, a wall built to protect the human world. Abandoning such a fortress was certainly heartrending for her and the knights.

“Fortunately, the number of monsters in the immediate area has dropped sharply, for the time being. New monsters will undoubtedly come in from the surrounding regions within ten days, but we should be able to evacuate in time.”

“Kudou slammed all the monsters he’d gathered against us and all, so he probably depleted the region.”

“We cannot afford to have the fortress become a den of undead monsters, so the bodies must be buried. Once that’s over, the commander has decided to depart.” Shiran took a deep breath. Her expression was stiff with tension. “At that time, we would like for you to come with us, Takahiro.”

“If you’d like my help, then of course I intend to accept.”

Now it was clear why she had asked about my plans. Evacuating the survivors meant moving almost five hundred people. The road running through the Woodlands was maintained for the use of the army, so its safety was apparently guaranteed to a certain extent. However, that didn’t mean they wouldn’t encounter any monsters while moving so many people at once. Fort Tilia’s forces had been the ones to maintain the safety of the road in the first place, so with those patrols paralyzed, the journey would get more dangerous the longer it went on. Also, there were many among the five hundred survivors who were non-combatants or no longer capable of fighting. We might be able to help reduce the number of casualties by going with them.

However, Shiran’s smile looked troubled. “I am of course happy to have your cooperation, but that wasn’t what I meant.”

I raised my eyebrow curiously as Shiran continued.

“The commander said that she would like to invite you to our country.”

“Huh...?”

“The fall of Fort Tilia is a major incident. The commander will no doubt be indisposed, having to explain the situation to everyone. Before that, she plans to return home to report to her father, His Majesty the King. At that time, she would like you to be present as well, Takahiro.”

I don't get it... I had in fact heard that the commander was the princess of a certain country. The home Shiran referred to was probably the capital of that country, but...

"Why would she want me there?"

"Do we require any other reason than wanting to invite an honored guest from another world to a warm reception? Besides, you are our benefactor. You saved our lives by battling Juumonji Tatsuya, and you fought by our side on the battlefield. If you have other plans, however, then I do not intend to push the matter."

"No, I don't really have any plans..."

"It is customary to invite the great saviors to the imperial capital for a hospitable welcome. The other visitors will surely be going there. However, you will not be going with them, will you?"

"Considering my abilities, it would be difficult to live as some grand hero here. I didn't even have the faintest intention of doing so to start with."

I hadn't lied when I'd spoken to Kudou two days ago. The most important thing to me was living together with the girls as their master. I had no plans of becoming some savior of the world.

"I'll be fine so long as I can find a place to live in peace alongside Lily and the others."

"If so, then I do believe this is a good proposal for you. How about taking the time to consider your options while consulting with the commander during your stay in our home country?"

It wasn't a bad idea. My goal was to locate a safe place to live. However, it was hard to take action in this world when I knew nothing about the environment. I needed connections. Even if it came down to only securing provisions and living in the Woodlands, we still needed to come up with and execute a plan from scratch, which was sure to be a thorny path. Consulting a princess could expand my options considerably.

Our choice was between wandering into a foreign land with no help or starting somewhere I already had a reassuring ally. It didn't need to be said which was the better option. All that was left was deciding whether the commander could be trusted...

I shot a glance over to Lily, who smiled back at me.

"Got it," I said with a nod. "I'll accept your offer. I'll discuss it with my companions, but I don't think they'll object."

"Thank goodness. I'll inform the commander of such afterward," Shiran replied with a broad smile.

"Oh yeah, what do you plan on doing, Shiran? I'm guessing you're going back with the commander to your country too?"

Shiran's position was extremely delicate right now. Nobody could tell at a glance that she was an undead monster. She looked slightly

pale, but that was pretty much it. The only ones who knew of her circumstances aside from us were the members of the Alliance Knights who had witnessed her rampage when she came back as a ghoul. The knights who fought shoulder to shoulder in the Woodlands had a strong sense of fellowship. They wouldn't even consider spreading rumors of their lieutenant's secret. It was pretty unlikely that it would get out. Having said that, it could cause trouble for the company if it were to come to light.

Shiran looked troubled, but she still smiled happily. "I'm honestly conflicted...but thankfully, the commander has told me to continue serving as a knight. She scolded me, saying I should've already known just from the fact that I hadn't been dismissed as her lieutenant."

"Seems just like her."

I had witnessed for myself that the bond tying these two women together as comrades in arms was far deeper than their simple connection as a lieutenant and commander. There was no way the commander would let her trusted subordinate worry about her future.

"I'm truly blessed."

Shiran sounded somewhat bitter as she took out something dangling from a chain around her neck. It was a ring with a red gem in it. After she had turned into a ghoul, she couldn't even put it on in front of anyone, but she couldn't throw it away. It was proof she was a knight.

"I am a knight, just as before. I will fight for the sake of those I must protect. I cannot thank the commander enough."

The runestone within the ring turned blue for a human and yellow for a ghoul. The red gem in Shiran's ring was proof that she was a demilich. However, she was a knight before any of that.

Shiran was strong. Even as an undead monster, she still had many worries, but she gazed unwaveringly at what she was meant to be. It was this self-awareness as a knight that supported her so.

"I am of course grateful to you as well, Takahiro. I'm very glad we met."

"Likewise. It seems we'll be together a while longer. Let's do our best."

Shiran smiled wholeheartedly, half her face hidden by an eyepatch.

So we decided to leave Fort Tilia behind for Shiran's home country.

Chapter 3: Reaching Out toward Happiness

Five days had passed since I'd heard about the commander's plans from Shiran. Even though we had suffered more casualties from sporadic ghoul outbreaks, the final cremations had taken place yesterday.

Shiran said the soldiers were being granted a day of rest before leaving the fortress tomorrow. Dealing with the large number of monster corpses was also progressing smoothly due to Lily's continual efforts. She had reported to me this morning that she was going to be done within the day.

I'll leave out what happened at that time... She had been quite busy getting everything done before our departure, so the mornings were the only time she could take off. During those times, she'd unconsciously sought compensation. The daily exchange of offense and defense early in the morning had become more and more perilous as the offense grew stronger and the defense grew weaker.

I hadn't gotten many chances to interact with any people aside from the Alliance Knights. I could only watch from afar. It looked like preparations were going smoothly. There was one thing I saw that I found rather surprising, though. This world had "automobiles."

"They differ from those moving steel boxes of your world, though," Shiran said.

They looked like simple covered wagons, but there was no horse to pull them. A runestone used the mana flowing beneath the earth as a power source to move the vehicle. They called them manamobiles. They didn't move all that fast. Their maximum speed was just around that of a regular sprint, but their normal speed was around a walk. Gathering mana on the move was insufficient, so they stored up mana during the night when they were still, that way they could move during the whole day.

"Manamobiles, huh? The magic technology here sure is amazing," I muttered.

"Eco-friendly, isn't it?" Lily said. "I only know of it from memories, but it's kinda like a solar car. Well, the only reason manamobiles don't move during the night is because of safety, so it's a little different."

"I find your world far more amazing, Takahiro. You have

technology that procures mana from sunlight, right? Mikihiko told me about it," Shiran said.

"It's a little different from that...but it's fine to interpret it that way," I replied. Explaining the difference would be difficult, so I was being somewhat evasive.

Incidentally, there were horses in this world, but they didn't really use them much in the Woodlands. The animals were scared of this region, so it required special training to bring them here. That was why transportation of non-essential goods generally used manamobiles. Even outside the Woodlands, these vehicles required less labor to maintain than horses, so they were used pretty widely.

This time, they had to transport distressed soldiers suffering from the after-effects of injuries, so they were using the manamobiles to do so. They were also loaning us the use of one such vehicle. This was because it would be troublesome for Gerbera, Rose, or Ayame to be spotted on our way. I gratefully accepted their kindness.

After hearing the details of tomorrow morning's departure, I headed over to see Rose. Lily still had to finish her work, so we split up in front of Rose's room. There was a knight accompanying us, so we kept the flirting to a minimum. I gave her dainty body a light hug, then waved goodbye. Now alone, I turned and knocked on the door.

"Rose, it's me." My knocks sounded stiff, and they echoed through the corridor like a manifestation of the tension within me.

"Good morning, Master."

What greeted me...wasn't a faceless mannequin, but a gray-haired woman wearing clothes she'd borrowed from Lily and a mask covering her face. It was still unfamiliar to me, but this was what Rose looked like now. On the day Fort Tilia had been attacked, before we'd chased after Sakagami, I had rendezvoused with Rose to find that she was already dressed like this. The mask she was wearing now was brand new. There was a hole where her right eye would be, but just looking at the remaining eye through her mask, it was clear her face was no longer flat and unmoving.

Apparently, Rose had been secretly altering her entire body. Judging from her habitual behavior, I understood she was hiding it from me because she didn't want me to see it until she was satisfied with what she made. It was a fixation of hers as a crafter.

Rose's face had been damaged when she encountered the monsters pouring down on Fort Tilia. It was already a work in progress to begin with, so she didn't want to show it to anyone. That was why I had yet to see the face she had hidden beneath that mask. Nevertheless, I could easily imagine it. She had an intricately made human face that was practically indistinguishable from a real one. I could tell that much from the single eye I could barely see. I'd been

quite shocked when I saw her like this that night. She had been with Katou, but she'd looked like a complete stranger. Still, I could tell it was definitely Rose at the time through our mental path.

Currently, Rose's body was still that of a puppet from the neck down. Her joints past her sleeves and below the hem of her skirt were clearly visible. The color of her skin was also the same as an inorganic mannequin, so she still didn't really look human. However, at the same time, she was incomparably more of a woman than she had been before.

In a way, she had the loveliness of a doll. That mix of inorganic substance and femininity had a unique sweetness to it that made her shine. I fully agreed she looked like the "cute doll" she'd mentioned wanting to make.

Her gray hair fell down her back and was tied into a braid. She wore a dress that covered her body. Even the earnest gaze from beneath her mask was completely feminine, a stark contrast to her previous asexual appearance.

Maybe this was why I felt slightly bewildered talking with her now. The girl before me was Rose. My precious Rose. Nothing about that had changed. However, there was something mixed into that perception now, something I had previously overlooked. It was probably that I was now aware that Rose was a girl.

If I talked to anyone about this, they would be astonished at me for only noticing it now. I'd spent a lot of time with Rose, and I'd seen her gain the ability to speak and go from a simple carved puppet to more of a mannequin. I'd known from this process that Rose's mind was feminine, and I'd discovered from her relationship with Katou that she had a side to her much like a teenage girl.

However, the change she'd gone through this time was decidedly different in some way. For the first time, I was aware that Rose was a member of the opposite sex, despite supposedly knowing that before. This was likely the cause of my bewilderment.

There was of course nothing to be bewildered about just because she was of the opposite sex. She was my precious companion, just as always. That was how it was supposed to be, but such logic didn't help me feel any less perplexed. It was quite troubling.

After I knocked, Rose opened the door and I entered the room. There was another girl inside wearing a school uniform, with black hair that went down to her shoulders.

"Morning. You're looking better, Katou."

"Good morning, Senpai. Thanks to you, I've completely recovered now."

Katou was sitting comfortably on the carpet in the middle of the room. There was a pile of wood carvings on the corner of the carpet. It

seemed Katou had been practicing sensing the flow of mana by leaning against Rose while she created magic tools. She was trying to learn magic this way, for the time being.

“Masss—sss—ter!”

“Morning, Asarina. You’re looking good today too.”

Asarina, who usually acted docile while we were outside, stretched out from the back of my hand as Katou greeted her and played with her. I watched the charming scene play out and took a seat at the table by the window. Katou rose to her feet, patted the dust off her skirt, and then sat down on the bed.

I gestured Rose over to the chair in front of me. She looked at me from the one eye beneath her mask. I gave her a nod, and she took a seat, albeit hesitantly. Katou had the tiniest of smiles on her face as she watched Rose.

Up until now, from what I’d seen indirectly, Katou didn’t seem to be forcing herself. She had a morbid fear of men. Before Lily and I had headed to the fortress, when we were about to meet the group of students and knights on the path in the Woodlands, her condition had deteriorated sharply. Afterward, Katou had stayed behind with Rose and Gerbera.

On the day Fort Tilia was attacked, I had brought the two of them along with me to corner the double-headed wolf Berta and left Katou with the Alliance Knights. I’d heard later that she had collapsed once more while taking refuge in the Woodlands with them. She’d looked fine before we split up, but she had apparently been putting on a brave act at the time so as to not worry us. Forcing herself like that had ended up taking quite a toll on her, so she’d stayed in bed for several days following that.

I was the only man she didn’t fear or reject, perhaps because I had made an impression when I took her under my care, or because of the time we’d spent traveling together in the Woodlands. Regardless, I’d been anxious when I came to see her after hearing that she’d collapsed from being near men. I was relieved to be able to speak with her like this, even now.

I was suddenly conscious of what I was feeling. Before, I wouldn’t have acknowledged or even accepted this sense of relief. It seemed the change occurring in my heart ever since coming to Fort Tilia had taken my relationship with Katou in a good direction as well.

Just then, Katou looked over my way as she realized something. “Huh? Now that I think of it, is Kei not with you today?”

“No, she’s busy today because of the preparations for tomorrow’s departure.”

Up until yesterday, Shiran’s niece Kei would accompany me whenever I came here. We had asked her to tell us many things, things

that were common knowledge in this world. We were about to set foot into the world of humanity, after all. We had allies, so things were still looking positive for the time being, but we didn't know what could happen until we secured a stable livelihood. We needed to be as prepared as possible. The more knowledge we had, the better. It just so happened that over the last five days, I couldn't really help out in the fortress due to my delicate position, so I had plenty of time to spare. That was why I had asked Kei to teach us in the meantime. Given tomorrow's departure, however, Kei was busy today.

Katou's shoulders slumped ever so slightly. "I see... That's unfortunate."

When Katou had collapsed the other day, the only women nearby were Shiran and Kei. Kei had helped Katou out back then, and she had also helped take care of her when she was bedridden in the fortress, so the two of them had ended up getting along well. So long as Katou feared men, having a girl like Kei around was reassuring. A natural bond had formed between Katou, Kei, and Rose. It was pleasant to watch the three of them chat.

"Oh, right," Katou said, suddenly looking up at Rose. "Sorry, you had something you wanted to talk about with Majima-senpai, didn't you?"

"I don't mind waiting until after your conversation is done, Mana."

Rose must have been waiting for us to reach a good stopping point.

"Hm? What did you want to talk about, Rose?" I said, urging her on.

"First is regarding the runestones I borrowed," Rose replied respectfully.

"Oh? Did you figure something out?"

Rose had borrowed several runestone-based magic tools from the Alliance Knights. These were all placed on the carpet in the middle of the room. There was a canteen that created water from mana, a lighter that could create a small flame, a knight's ring used to differentiate a human from a ghoul, a magic bag with expanded storage space and preservative effects, and a few other various tools. We had also received the unprocessed runestones we were hoping to get. These were kept in stock to make more rings for the knights. They didn't have much value as runestones, so we had permission to fiddle with them however we liked.

"Just as you are aware, it is possible to manifest the same effects as magic by allowing mana to flow through a runestone. I had a fair amount of interest in this. I thought I would be able to create something of use to you, Master."

I'd also thought of this myself. Even though I could manipulate mana, I couldn't use magic. I had chosen to learn how to strengthen my body instead. I didn't regret prioritizing my ability to avoid a crisis, but I wouldn't complain about supplementing my strength with runestones. They were valuable goods, but if Rose could learn how to process them herself, it was a different matter. The problem was whether this was possible.

"I need to understand the structure of runestones before I can process them. I tried asking Kei, but unfortunately, she doesn't know much about it."

"I asked Shiran about this before too. She said runestones were created for people who couldn't use magic in the first place, so they don't need to know how it works to be able to use them."

It was important for widely spread goods to be usable without knowledge of the principles behind them. For example, I knew about solar energy, but couldn't explain how it worked to Shiran. Similarly, pretty much nobody knew the theory behind how runestones worked except for the people who took part in creating them. Since the manufacturing method for barrier runestones had been completely lost, perhaps such techniques had been concealed on purpose.

Moreover, unlike our world, they didn't have books published in the tens of thousands available in a single place, nor did they have the internet, a veritable treasure trove overflowing with information. It wouldn't be strange if only certain circles had knowledge of magical technologies.

"I tried actually using the runestones as well, but I couldn't understand the theory behind them. After that, I tried asking Lily about it."

"Lily?"

"Yes. She can use both runestones and magic, so I thought she could figure something out by comparing them."

I cocked my head but immediately realized this wasn't a bad idea. My senses were out of whack after spending over two months in the Woodlands, but after giving it some thought, Lily was from the Depths, an unlivable region. She could also use grade 3 magic. The locals couldn't use magic any higher than that, so she was actually the perfect person to consult.

"So what did she say?"

"According to her, the runestone acts as a supplement for the construction of a glyph."

"A supplement for a glyph?"

Her reply was daunting. It didn't really tell me anything. I had no idea what a glyph really was. It was like explaining a technical term with another technical term. Rose seemed to take my reaction into

consideration and continued to explain things to me diligently.

“That is what my sister told me. To use magic, one must be able to manipulate mana. However, that is not enough on its own.”

“Yeah. If that was all, I’d be able to use magic too.”

“Starting from Lily’s conclusion, magic requires mana to move in a particular flow. By doing so, the corresponding phenomenon occurs. Such laws exist in this world. In the case of magic, the flow manifests in a visible form known as a glyph. These laws don’t only apply to the mechanisms of magic either. The abilities inherent to monsters follow the same laws.”

“Hm? Doesn’t that mean humans can use the same abilities monsters can?” I asked, caught up on that detail.

“That’s true. If they can force their mana to flow in the same manner, then I believe it to be theoretically possible,” Rose replied with a nod before shaking her head. “However, in practice, humans and other monsters can’t use abilities inherent to a certain species. Each individual species of monster possesses a unique flow of mana, after all.”

“I see. Now that I think of it, the ring used to identify ghouls works by recognizing the difference between the way mana flows within humans and ghouls.”

“Even Lily didn’t realize such laws existed until she tried using a runestone. She’s been using magic by instinct. I create magic tools in a similar fashion.”

It was the same as the tale of an apple falling from a tree. Someone in the past realized that making mana flow in a particular way caused a corresponding phenomenon. They then used the theory to create runestones.

Katou looked like she recalled something as well.

“When I once commented that the way you created magic tools from wood was mysterious, you told me you didn’t know what I found mysterious about it, right? Sometimes things are so natural you don’t know how it works yourself.”

Rose nodded back to her.

“Meaning that runestones reproduce this particular flow of mana?” I asked.

Picture it as a channel used to direct water flow. Normally, the channel itself has to be created by hand to replicate a certain flow. In the case of a runestone, however, the channel has already been dug out, so it just needs mana to flow through it. Perhaps translation runestones required special training because these channels were split up into segments.

“Rose, did you perhaps succeed in carving one?” I asked with a glimmer of hope in my voice.

The mechanisms behind a runestone were clear now. Next was to verify whether she could process one herself.

“No, unfortunately not. I did try my hand at doing so, but I couldn’t do it.”

Rose stood up and retrieved several objects off the carpet before coming back. Four runestones tumbled from her hand onto the table. Three of them were crafted similarly to the gems used in the knights’ rings, and the last was an uncarved stone. All of them were black.

“Just as I said before, a runestone replicates a particular flow of mana. As such, to process a runestone, one has to know how to carve it and how mana is supposed to flow through it. This proved harder than I expected. It seems each raw runestone has its own idiosyncrasies. In three years...no, two, I should be able to get a handle on these through trial and error, but current circumstances would make it difficult to accomplish now.”

“I see. Nothing can be done about that, I guess,” I said with a small sigh.

“Yes. Therefore, I tried doing it my own way.”

“What...?”

Rose placed what she was holding in her opposite hand on the table. They were carved blue stones—or so they appeared, but their surfaces had a wood-grain pattern to them.

“These are ones I made from scratch. I suppose you could call them imitation runestones.”

“Imitations...?”

“As I said before, monsters, magic, and runestones all make use of the same principle. In short, by preparing a particular flow of mana, even without a runestone, it’s possible to manifest magic. Also, I have my own ability to create magic tools. I don’t know much about stones, but I do know about wood.”

As Rose touched one of the wooden runestones, a small spurt of water jumped out of its surface and wet the table. It was definitely a reproduction of water magic.

“This is still a prototype, so there are some areas where I cut corners, but I do believe I should be able to replicate the same level of magic as a real runestone one day.”

“That’s...amazing.”

“Thank you very much. I’ve gained a lot of experience in making all manner of things in accordance with your orders. Moreover, I believe it’s fortunate that I’ve been creating delicately detailed works as of late. It is a difficult job, but I somehow managed to reach the stage where I can complete a prototype.”

Rose placed her hand on the cheek of her mask and turned her eye to the corner of the room. The box there was filled with a

mountain of wood chips from failed attempts.

“However, there’s a problem with my imitation runestones. Because I can’t use magic, I have to examine a real runestone to get an understanding of its mana flow. The only imitation runestones I can make are limited to copies of runestones I’ve actually used.”

“I see. Still, that’s more than enough.”

I took the wet imitation runestone Rose passed to me and tried channeling my own mana flow through it. This runestone was used for everyday life, but I’d heard of runestones that were meant for combat. If we could copy those, there were countless ways we could use them. I really did want to get some, one way or another.

“I believe we can gradually discuss how to make use of this,” Rose said.

“Got it. I’ll give it some thought too. I’m the one who wants to use them and all.”

Talking to Mikihiko about it seemed like a good idea. He was familiar with games and whatnot, so I felt like he was more suited to such things than me.

“Thanks for your report. I’d like you to continue your research,” I told Rose.

“As you wish.”

“That was the first thing, so what else did you want to talk about?” I placed the imitation runestone back on the table and urged Rose on.

“I heard from Kei that you have been learning how to use a sword from the woman who has become your new servant, Shiran.”

“Huh? Yeah. Not that I’ve had many lessons yet.” I was somewhat confused by her question. I hadn’t expected to hear Shiran’s name. “Given the opportunity, I’d like to learn more from her, and I’m planning to ask her to teach me. What about it?”

“I don’t mind if it’s only when she has the time, but could you ask her to teach us servants as well?”

“That’s sudden... I don’t mind at least asking her.”

“Thank you very much,” Rose said with a bow.

“What brought this up all of a sudden?” I asked curiously.

“The other day, I crossed blades with the doppelqueen named Anton... Her powers were dreadful. I was unable to cut off the enemy’s path of retreat and therefore didn’t fulfill the duty you entrusted me with.”

Rose sounded overly serious and frustrated. I had no intention of criticizing her for that. On the contrary, it was my fault for misreading the situation and overlooking the possibility that Anton would be lying in wait. However, Rose’s personal thoughts were another matter altogether. She had a strong sense of loyalty, so the failure to

accomplish her duty was definitely a source of regret.

“What’s more, Anton is but one of the monsters Kudou controls. Also, that man named Juumonji was evenly matched with Gerbera, and she had to do her best just to put up a fight. Lily told me that she couldn’t even stall him for a second. My elder sister is stronger than me, and she wasn’t capable of that. It’s clear I wouldn’t have been able to do a thing.”

So she said, but Rose was in no way weak. She was a rare monster from the Depths, and she had gotten stronger when she’d remade her body. Her equipment was also powerful. These were all things she had acquired through constant effort.

However, it would still be hard for her to fight a cheater head-on. I thought I had readied myself as well, but their violence was horribly overwhelming. It was of course best if it never came to such conflict, but the current situation didn’t allow for such assumptions. There was Kudou, whose whereabouts were unknown, as well as the mystery member of the expeditionary force who had connected Juumonji with him.

Even without all that, our position in this world was very unstable. Despite having friends in the Alliance Knights, there was no way we could rest easy. We had to ready our forces as much as possible in case the unforeseen happened.

“We must get stronger by any means,” Rose said.

“And that’s where Shiran comes in, huh?” I replied, sighing in understanding.

“That’s not all, of course. Just as I reported earlier regarding the practical use of imitation runestones, I do believe we should explore ways of making use of them. However...”

“I know. Learning combat techniques is an especially effective way of getting stronger.”

“Indeed. Essentially, we monsters possess powerful physiques, and we leave battle to our strength, our speed, the instincts we’re born with, and the combat experience we gain through surviving in the forest. There is no technique to it. Having said that, systemizing some sort of technique ourselves would take far too much time.”

One thing humans excelled at compared to the monsters of the Woodlands was their ability to pass down knowledge and techniques throughout generations. Be it by oral tradition or writing, the accumulation of knowledge was a tremendous weapon. This was what Rose’s proposal focused on.

“Acquiring combat techniques that are backed by a long history of use should be a major advantage...” Rose continued with passion, but then she suddenly turned her head to the side. “At least, that’s what Mana suggested.”

I followed Rose's gaze to where Katou was sitting in complete astonishment.

"Huh...? Rose?!" Katou remained dumbfounded for a few seconds, then shot up from the bed in a panic. In an unusual turn, her expression was filled with consternation. "Didn't we discuss that this would be *your* suggestion?!"

"But this is a truly helpful plan. I'm happy that you would like to yield such a feat over to me, but I still do not believe we should hide that this was your proposal at the outset."

"What, so Katou's the one who thought of this?" I asked.

"Yes," Rose answered, turning back my way and nodding. "I decided it would be better for you to know, Master."

Rose was right. I already owed Katou a great debt. I didn't want to take advantage of her kindness without knowing about it. Besides, it was important that she get credit for her accomplishments. Rose seemed to be of the same opinion and spoke of Katou in a meaningful tone.

"Mana really has been thinking of all sorts of matters. In fact, she gave me several suggestions regarding the imitation runestones too."

"Hmm. Is that so?"

I threw in an appropriate response and looked over to Katou, but she immediately covered her face. I could still tell it was flushed, though.

"No. Um. I didn't really do all that much. Someone else would've mentioned it eventually..."

"I don't think so," I told her. "This kind of thing is better off said sooner than later. You're a big help."

I felt a little bad for her, but I ended up smiling. Seeing her flustered and bashful, acting like a girl her age, was rather refreshing. I honestly found it quite charming.

"Thank you, Katou. Please let me know if you think of anything else."

"Okay..."

Katou was still hiding her face, but she gave a quick nod. She was smiling shyly, which cast aside the shadow that always hung over her expression. Before me now was a completely normal girl who felt embarrassed from being thanked. From her reaction, I could feel that our relationship was changing. It made me happy. But it also made me regret what would come next.

"Although, I guess I can't rely on you all that much from now on," I added.

"Huh...?"

"Unlike you, we won't be going to the imperial capital. You've helped us a ton up until now, so we'll have to get our act together."

Shiran had mentioned that all surviving students other than me were going to the imperial capital. That was because anyone who didn't have the ability to tame monsters was sure to receive a warm welcome there. Naturally, this also applied to Katou, so we would have to bid farewell to the girl we'd been traveling with through the Woodlands.

I regretted that we had to part ways with the girl who had become Rose's friend. I also felt this way because I was just starting to build up my relationship with her. However, I had to fulfill the promise I'd made when we first met—to find her somewhere safe. And now, I was finally able to repay her for what she had done for me, even if just a little.

"There's not all that much time left, but please continue to get along with Rose," I said.

Katou slowly raised her head. The red in her cheeks had already faded.

"Okay..."

It felt like her very existence was fading away. It left me bewildered. It was because of the smile on her face. It was different from the one she'd shown me just seconds ago. It was a dry smile. The shadow that had disappeared returned to her expression. I instinctively knew that the words I'd just said were the cause of this. I didn't know why, though. As such, I didn't know what else to say. I held my tongue and lowered my gaze away from her weak smile. An awkward silence fell over us.

"Master," a calm voice said. Rose was looking at me with a tranquil gaze. "There's one more topic I'd like to discuss. May I?"

Now that she mentioned it, we were still in the middle of talking.

"What is it?"

"I have a request. Could we take Mana with us to the country we are to visit?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Katou's head shoot up.

"Take Katou with us...?" I repeated, perplexed by the sudden suggestion.

Rose nodded. "Yes. She only recently collapsed, just as you are aware. If she were suddenly surrounded by strangers in such a state, wouldn't she be helpless?"

That made perfect sense. The Alliance Knights also knew of Katou's condition. If she went to the imperial capital, they were sure to help her out, like having a woman accompany her. However, even if they did that, it wouldn't change the fact that she would be surrounded by strangers. Katou's heart was already in a fragile state to begin with. She was emotionally unstable, in a sense. I couldn't imagine how important Rose's presence was to her. Pulling them apart

didn't seem like a good idea.

"If possible, I would like to stay by Mana's side as well... Also, whenever it is practical, I would like you to be with her too, Master."

"Me...?"

I didn't really get it. I was different from Rose, with whom Katou had spent many fulfilling hours together in the Woodlands. There wasn't much purpose in someone like me being near Katou... Or maybe there was. In her current state where she feared all men, having someone like me that she was okay with nearby was valuable to her, even if it was a coincidence brought about by the course of events.

"I get what you're trying to say," I replied with a nod, "but coming with us is a little questionable."

"Are you opposed to it, Master?"

"That's not what I mean. It's just that, as a monster tamer, my position is extremely unstable. I can't promise that Katou wouldn't get caught up in some kind of trouble simply by being with us."

"So if Mana wishes for it while being fully aware of such circumstances, then will you take her with us?"

I gave it some thought, then said, "If that's what she wants."

If Katou wanted this, I had no objection to such a request.

After confirming what I said, Rose turned to Katou. "He agreed. What will you do, Mana?"

"I-I'm..."

Katou averted her gaze. She looked frail. Seeing her like that, Rose stood from her seat. She knelt down in front of Katou, then took her tightly clasped hands into her own.

"Do you remember, Mana? What I said to you back then, I mean." Her tone was a gentle one I'd never heard before. "You're a part of my happiness. Please don't forget that."

Katou's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "Rose..."

"Or do you perhaps intend to make me sad?"

"Putting it like that is unfair..." Katou pouted, but it was directed at a friend who knew her heart.

Rose seemed to be smiling beneath her mask. "I don't mind if it's unfair. You must attain happiness for yourself. Please say it. Speak your honest feelings. If you appeal to him earnestly, my master will surely answer you."

I couldn't understand their conversation, but I knew it was important to them.

Katou looked to Rose with an imploring gaze, then timidly turned my way.

"S-Senpai..."

She was clearly frightened. However, it was far better than the

gloomy smile she'd shown me moments ago. Her fear was just a sign that she was fighting against her own cowardice.

"I would...like to go with you...Senpai," she said in a quiet and unsteady voice. "I may hold you back. I may end up being a bother. So I know I shouldn't be saying this. But... But I..."

"You're not really a..."

I paused, suddenly realizing something. This wasn't what she wanted me to say. For the first time, Katou was acting willfully in front of me. Even though she feared rejection, she earnestly made her request.

So what was I to do? How could I respond to her feelings?

Rose looked my way. Her gaze was filled with boundless trust.

"Got it," I said with a slight smile.

After giving it some thought, going to the imperial capital didn't guarantee Katou's safety. Someone like Juumonji could be hiding among the gathering of students. Even the exploration team was suspicious. If she remained within reach, then I could at least try to protect her with my own hands.

"Katou, come with us."

Her happy expression was so beautiful I was completely entranced by it.

Chapter 4: Leaving Fort Tilia Behind

I came to the top of the outer ramparts with Lily. The walls were still deeply scarred by the other day's attack. The area around Fort Tilia, the fortress enshrined in the northern region of the Woodlands, had been cleared out to provide an unobstructed view in case monsters approached. Looking down from the walls, the boundary between cleared ground and green forest clearly demonstrated the existence of this human domain.

That boundary now looked like something was encroaching on it. It wasn't just my imagination. Trees were already growing from what was supposed to be infertile ground. Even though I was just a visitor from another world, I could tell this growth was unnatural. This was the Woodlands, a special forest rich with mana. The trees here grew quickly. This applied even more so to territory that was no longer human.

Now that the fortress was lost, the Woodlands were already creeping in on it. The other day, Kei had told us it was like the forest knew of the defeat and impending retreat of the humans, so it sped up the growth of its trees to take back the ground. Seeing it right before my eyes made the Woodlands feel like a monster of its own. It sent a chill down my spine.

"So this is where you've been, Takahiro."

Lily and I turned toward the voice that had called out to me. Standing there was a tall knight with a firm build, the woman who led the Third Company of the Alliance Knights. Next to her was Mikihiko.

"I'll be going ahead. Please take care of the rear," the commander said.

"Understood," I responded.

The commander left with those quick words. Her wide back bore the weight of hundreds of lives. It felt like every step she took carried that burden.

"The commander's looking a little worn out. Is she all right?" I asked.

Mikihiko frowned. "Some people have been saying we should wait for those guys who went into the Depths for that rescue operation to return... Especially Iino Yuna. It ended up wasting a bunch of her time to convince them otherwise. She's already super busy to begin with, dammit."

The Skanda Iino Yuna had led some Imperial Knights into the Depths to rescue any survivors back at the Colony and in those huts protected by barrier runestones. It had been ten days since they'd departed.

Shiran had already led a force of Alliance Knights to round up the survivors in the relatively nearby huts, so Iino was checking the ones that were further away. She had suggested they visit a large number of huts in one go and stop by the site of the Colony, so what had initially been a twenty-day trip had turned into something that would likely take over a month.

I felt sorry for Iino and the Imperial Knights, but the fortress didn't have the leisure to wait that long. Fortunately, they were with the Skanda, whose combat abilities stood out even within the exploration team. Their safety was pretty much guaranteed. The knights had been carrying valuable magic tools that looked like regular bags but had a far larger capacity than their appearance suggested. They also preserved their contents, so provisions weren't a problem either.

The commander's decision to abandon the fortress was the appropriate choice. However, even if it was, it didn't mean everyone would easily accept it. Iino was a visitor from afar; she was viewed as a savior of this world. It was natural that some would want to wait for her return, so the commander had had a rough time trying to convince everyone.

"Besides, thinking of what's to come..." Mikihiko added, ruffling his hair. "When a major incident occurs, someone's gotta take responsibility. But the ones in charge of Fort Tilia were slaughtered down to the last man..."

"You mean the responsibility is being pinned on the commander?"

"The knights' only job was to suppress the monsters in the Woodlands, not defend the fortress. In fact, the commander couldn't even talk about how the fortress was managed. With nobody else left, though, it's possible the responsibility will get forced on her. I've been here longer than you guys, so I know how weak the Alliance Knights' position is here."

Mikihiko let out a weary sigh, took a deep breath, and clenched his fist.

"I need to try harder so that doesn't happen," he continued. "So I need to get going too. Oh yeah, I'll drop by at night, so let Rose and, um, Katou know as well."

I had discussed imitation runestones with Mikihiko already. He'd only briefly listened to what Rose had to say so far, but he seemed to have a few ideas already. She was going to talk with him some more once there was the time. Katou was also going to sit in on the

conversation. This was something she had requested, as a form of rehabilitation for her androphobia while she helped with the runestones. In any case, Katou hadn't collapsed this morning when Mikihiko had been in the room talking to Rose. At this rate, I felt like she would get better in time.

"Sorry for making you put up with us even though you're so busy."

"Ha ha. No need to say things like that. Besides, I'm enjoying myself."

"Oh yeah, you like making things too, huh?"

Mikihiko was a guy of many hobbies. He had often worked part time jobs without telling the school so he could save money to buy plastic models, among other things. Rose's crafting abilities apparently tugged on his heartstrings. He had looked fully engrossed and had even trembled in excitement when he spoke with her.

"Well, that's true. But that's not all," Mikihiko said, waving his hand about with a grin. "I was just thinking of what a smooth operator you've become in the time I haven't seen you."

"Is this about Lily...? Or maybe Gerbera?"

I brought up the name of the other girl who was affectionate with me, but Mikihiko shook his head.

"Nope. Well, there's that one too, but I'm more referring to Katou. I mean, she's so sweet, ain't she? She's somehow managing with me nearby 'cause I'm your friend, right? Her motivation to try and not hold you back shows how strong her feelings are and all."

"Well...it's true that she puts her faith in me."

Mikihiko's words reminded me of how Katou had asked if she could join us during Rose's consultation with Mikihiko. When I'd asked if she would be fine, she'd replied, "If you'll be there with me, Senpai," with flushed cheeks. Mikihiko's description of her being sweet was entirely correct.

"But it's not like that for her or anything," I added.

Katou was different from Gerbera. Without knowing the circumstances, it would be easy to misunderstand her. However, as she was now, she didn't have the leisure to be head over heels. She was fighting against a severe case of androphobia. She wouldn't be able to see any man in such a way.

Mikihiko didn't know the full details, so it was normal for him to misunderstand. Having said that, this was a difficult time for her, so I didn't want him to poke fun at her about it... That was what I'd been trying to tell him indirectly, but Mikihiko made an exquisitely doubtful expression and turned to Lily.

"Lily, I've got some serious questions here. How'd you bring down this dolt?"

“Going with the flow was part of it... But let’s see... He responds to a wholehearted and earnest approach, you know?”

“Hmm? Hmmmmm? Ahh... Got it. In short, you pushed him down and took him?” Mikihiko said with a snap of his fingers.

“What kind of interpretation is that?” I quipped with a raised brow.

It had, in fact...gone something like that... Actually, it had gone exactly like that. Thinking back on it now, I had never gone on the offensive of my own accord, had I? On the contrary, it was like I was always being pushed back...? I stood there in shock, having just realized the state of my manliness.

“They’re all good girls, so treat them well, yeah? Well, I guess you don’t need me telling you that,” Mikihiko said.

“Yeah, of course.”

I nodded back to him, and Mikihiko gave me an enormous smile.

“I see. Okay then, I gotta get going... Aah! Goddammit! I want the commander’s warmth!” Mikihiko screamed out.

“Mikihiko!” a scream answered from afar. “What kind of nonsense are you yelling out so loudly?!”

“Shit! She heard me?! Sorry Commander! I was screwing around, but I’m serious!”

She had yelled at him, but he still ran off toward the commander while blurting out more nonsense.

“Hang in there, Mikihiko,” I muttered as I watched my friend run off.

Mikihiko had been at Fort Tilia longer than us and was well-known throughout the fortress. His situation wasn’t delicate like mine, so he could use his position as a savior to support the commander.

The commander had ended up in a leadership position among the survivors of Fort Tilia by circumstance. She was, at most, the commander of the Third Company of the Alliance Knights. To the imperials who made up the large majority of the survivors, she was nothing more than a foreigner. Having Mikihiko by her side made an enormous difference in how easy it was for her to take action. He was doing the best he could. I felt like I didn’t want to lose to him, perhaps because we were friends.

We looked down from the walls as lines of soldiers began marching across the temporary bridge in front of the main gate. They were walking in columns with a space in the middle for the manamobiles to travel under guard.

The Alliance Knights, in their dull gray armor, were leading the march. Half of their numbers were present in this vanguard. Among them was Shiran’s white armor. Even though she’d lost her ability to detect enemies, she was still the strongest knight in the northern

Woodlands.

The remaining Alliance Knights were defending the center of the group. This was the force the commander was leading. Moving around five hundred people down a road naturally led to an extended line. The road itself cut through the forest and was surrounded by fiendish monsters. The commander's force was overseeing the entire group while protecting the center of the column. Mikihiko was right there next to her, wearing leather armor over his school uniform.

"Looks like we'll be able to depart without any delays," I observed.

I watched over the whole departure from above, but at the very least, there were no signs of any monsters. It seemed everyone's enthusiasm would remain high instead of being cut short right after setting out.

"Okay, let's get going too."

We had taken on the job of the rearguard. Fewer eyes would be on us in that position if worse came to worst and my servants had to take action. In addition, the vehicles the non-combatants were riding in were gathered at the end of the line. Their position relied on our forces, proving that the commander trusted us. This was the plan she had taken great pains to assemble to guarantee as many survivors as possible.

We passed through a building from the top of the wall and headed toward the front gate. All of the manamobiles were pretty much gone by then. Only one of them wasn't moving. I jumped up on this last vehicle into the driver's seat. I caught Lily in my arm as she hopped up after me, then turned around and flipped open the cloth that was in place so that nobody could see inside. The rest of my group and Kei were having a friendly chat within.

"We're going to set off soon," I said to them as Lily and I took our seats side by side in the driver's position.

Manamobiles were fundamentally the same as carriages, except they used mana as an energy source instead of horses. The front seats were wide enough for three average-sized men to sit comfortably together and were fitted with a slanted footrest to help stabilize the body. A curved mudguard was installed on the front that went up to the driver's chest, and it was furnished with a gray runestone about the size of a fist, just within reach. There was a carving of a horse head attached to the top of the mudguard, facing outward like the figurehead of a boat.

I touched the runestone affixed near its neck. Operating the manamobile was pretty simple. All I had to do was touch the runestone and channel my mana into it. This functioned as an ignition switch. It used the mana it stored from the environment as a power

source, so there was no need to constantly supply it with mine. I had asked what decided forward or backward motion, but the main runestone could only drive the car straight forward.

A magical force pulled on the frame but didn't directly affect anything loaded on board. The start was a bit slippery. The wheels creaked and started moving, clattering against the ground as the manamobile shook about. I couldn't say it was comfortable, but considering the condition of the road, this was pretty much inevitable. It seemed like it would be difficult for someone with car sickness.

"Takahiro, how is my sister doing?"

Just as we got moving, chasing the manamobile in front of us, Kei popped out from the back between myself and Lily. Anyone who saw her acting like a friendly puppy would smile at this. She had short hair, the same beautiful blonde as Shiran's, that was tied up in short braids today. This was likely Katou's handiwork. She did have a habit of changing Rose's hairstyle all the time.

"Shiran's doing a splendid job leading the group. What were you all chatting about back there?"

"About my hometown. Gerbera said she wanted to hear about it."

"Indeed. I have yet to hear such stories, after all."

The girl in white popped out next, grabbing both my shoulders from behind and placing her head next to mine. She looked at me from the side. I was used to it now, but her captivating beauty was even closer to me than the innocent little Kei. It seemed like a small shake of the vehicle would knock our cheeks together. Her silky white hair, which resembled spider threads, brushed against my neck and tickled me.

"Be careful, Gerbera," I said, shooting a glance at her cheery red eyes. "Your lower body stands out. It'll be bad if someone spots you by accident. Come on, look, Ayame is even imitating you."

The little blowfox had jumped out and landed on my lap when Gerbera had peeked out. Ayame plopped herself down comfortably. Her nose was twitching about, perhaps because of the constantly changing scent in the air as the vehicle moved.

"I know. With only my upper body sticking out like this, I am no different from a human. Ayame can't be seen when sitting atop your lap either."

She had at least given it some thought, apparently. I was fine with it so long as she understood, but Gerbera was a careless girl. It was better to hammer the nail in all the way.

"Sorry, but when we reach the village, keep yourself hidden. You're already very eye-catching as it is. Attracting unnecessary attention would be dangerous when we're keeping secrets."

"Gerbera is super pretty, after all. Isn't she, Takahiro?" Kei added.

“Yeah.”

“H-Hmm? Is that so?” Gerbera said, putting her hand to her cheek.

I tore my gaze from her cute reaction and turned back to Kei.

“Anyway, you were talking about your hometown? How much did you get through?”

“Ummm, let’s see...”



The largest nation on this continent was officially called the Eryx Empire. It was a feudal nation led by an emperor, and nobles governed its territories. The Empire had also vassalized a group of small nations designated as the Alliance. This name was a relic from the age when they’d joined forces in opposition against the Empire. It had happened centuries ago, around the same time that *The Tragedy of the Undead King Carl* was said to have taken place.

Despite its vast territories, only a small portion of the Empire bordered the Woodlands. In contrast, the countries of the Alliance all looked out over the dangerous forest. That was the historical background of the land.

Each country of the Alliance obviously had its own name. For example, the Third Company of the Alliance Knights were dispatched from one such country called Aker. The Alliance countries on the southern edge of the Empire, facing the northern region of the Woodlands, were called the Five Northern Kingdoms. These countries were located to the west of Fort Tilia. The Alliance countries at the eastern edge were called the Three Eastern Kingdoms. Incidentally, it was said that the forest ran all the way to the west and south ends of the continent, but nobody had ever confirmed it.

The country the commander had invited us to was Aker, one of the Five Northern Kingdoms. It was composed of only a handful of settlements that were large enough to call cities. The rest of the small nation was made up of villages.

About one-third of Aker’s territory was covered by precipitous mountains, and some parts of its territory also occupied regions where the Woodlands had been cleared out. The nation was poor, but it was brimming with militaristic spirit as a form of national character. The children of reclamation villages, like the one Kei came from, were taught how to fight with a sword at a young age. They probably wouldn’t have been able to survive otherwise.

Seeing how their small territory bordered the Woodlands, the threat from monsters was serious. That was why the parent organization of the Third Company, the Order of National Defense, was led by royalty. The knights ran around from east to west within

their borders, busily fighting off monsters.

This sort of situation was supposedly normal within the Five Northern Kingdoms. The image I had of kings was more akin to royalty in games, where an old man sat comfortably in a vast room with a red rug in a big old castle. The royalty of the Alliance countries, on the other hand, were actually closer to the military commanders of the Sengoku period of Japan. That was why a princess like the commander was going out onto battlefields with knights.

The survivors from Fort Tilia, led by the commander, were following the road north that went through the Woodlands. This road led to Lorenz County in the southern Empire. The closest city to Fort Tilia was the trade city Serrata located in the center of this territory. We were starting by going north until we reached this city.

The commander was planning on reporting the events at Fort Tilia to each region from there. Serrata had a means of long-distance communication that was connected to Fort Tilia and Fort Ebenus. However, the device in Fort Tilia had been lost during the monster attack, so they had to use the nearest one available. A fast horse had already been sent to Serrata the day after the attack, but there was no guarantee that the information would get through the Woodlands safely. Plus, it would lend more weight if a person of high standing delivered the report.

After that, she was going to leave the imperial soldiers in the care of the imperial noble Count Lorenz. Then she was going to lead the Alliance Knights back to her home country and report the situation to her father in person. Our plan was to go with her. Aker was located southwest of Serrata, meaning we were taking somewhat of a roundabout route to get there, but we didn't really have much of a choice.

In any case, the important thing now was getting through the Woodlands safely. We had to keep focused.



“Yaaah!”

A single yell, a single strike.

A black spear pierced through the air like a bullet, right into one of the six heads of an enormous snake, a lesser hydra. The monster had attempted an attack on the soldiers protecting the line of cars. A teenage girl—or rather, a monster mimicking one, my servant Lily—pulled the bloodied spearpoint out. She easily dodged another head trying to thrust its poisonous fangs into her, then stomped the lunging head into the ground.

“Taaah!”

She used her foot to pivot and spin around. Her white skirt

fluttered as her long leg drew a beautiful arc in the air, delivering a roundhouse kick into one of the lesser hydra's necks. The impact was far more devastating than her delicate appearance would suggest. The snake's head flew off into the darkness of the forest with a wet crunch and vanished.

"How one-sided... It's just a monster from the Fringes, but still," I muttered to myself.

"Isn't she great?"

I sat on the driver's seat of the halted manamobile. Gerbera was holding up the cloth behind me, bending forward in amusement as she shook my shoulders.

Lily's movements were a level beyond what they used to be. Not only had she gained a lot of mana by eating the mountain of monster corpses in Fort Tilia, but a portion of her sensory organs were now enhanced through mimicry, much like her sense of smell after eating that first firefang. As a result, she not only had a handle on the situation around us, but she even knew all the minute details of her own body, giving her far better control than before.

That wasn't all either. A red glyph took shape in Lily's left hand. It was grade 2 fire magic. The fireball shot out and exploded, burning one of the enormous snake's faces. It screamed and bent backward as a spear plunged into its throat.

Lily could now use new magic after eating monsters like fire elementals. She could cast grade 2 fire and earth magic. They were weaker than the water and wind magic she could already use, but it definitely expanded her tactical arsenal. She was proactively using her newly acquired magic so that she could get accustomed to it.

The lesser hydra hit the dirt in no time at all. With so many eyes around, though, she really couldn't go eating it. The reason Lily fought on her own was because we felt it would be less stimulating to the soldiers accompanying us, seeing how she looked human. If she were to act like a monster, it would defeat our intentions.

Lily had already eaten a lesser hydra during the cleanup in Fort Tilia anyway, so there wasn't really any reason to eat this one. It was fine to leave it. She walked back our way while basking in the strangely passionate gazes from the soldiers she'd saved. I asked Gerbera, who hid herself back in the vehicle, to relay the situation to the others.

"I'm baaack!"

"Good job out there."

Lily sat down next to me at the front of the manamobile. I wiped the snake blood off her cheek with a cloth, and Lily smiled bashfully in great spirits. I didn't even know how many times it was now that I had tended to her like this.

It was the sixth day since we'd left Fort Tilia. We had encountered monsters many times over since then. From what Mikihiko had said when we last talked, we were bumping into more monsters than expected. It was pretty much a given, seeing that the knights hadn't been able to clear the vicinity of monsters ever since the siege.

Shiran's detection abilities were currently unavailable, so we were the only ones who could take preemptive action against monsters using Lily and Ayame's sense of smell. Since Lily looked no different from a human and her combat strength was excellent, she ended up leaping from our vehicle multiple times a day.

She could only cover the back end of the line, however. I didn't get to witness it myself, but Shiran was evidently doing the work of a hundred people at the front. There was still a limit to how much the two of them could cover, though. The Alliance Knights and the soldiers repelled the remaining monsters. Whenever monsters appeared, the soldiers formed columns on either side of the vehicles and readied their shields.

They basically took on a defensive policy. Their only job was protecting the manamobiles carrying the wounded. Directly taking part in battle was the job of the more experienced Alliance Knights. They would charge in with their large shields at the ready, protecting the comrades to their rear as they looked for openings and thrust out their weapons.

Once they had pinned down a monster with this approach, the soldiers would continuously bombard them with arrows and magic. The Imperial Army wasn't weak. Even if they didn't have the strength to directly clash with monsters, their ability to whittle down and kill them from a distance was one advantage they had over the Alliance Knights. Their nature was to work in large formations like this, which was difficult to do in the Woodlands. This contrasted with the knights, who favored individual combat strength.

Soldiers preferred to fire arrows and magic from afar whenever they could. If they had to engage in close combat, they formed a spear wall to take the monsters down. Their combat style was based on the assumption that they'd be fighting defensive battles inside a fortress or in open fields. They practiced the trustworthy tactic of violence through numbers. That was simply how they were trained.

A large army of monsters, like the one Kudou had sent, was the Imperial Army's worst enemy. Unlike when they had fought the initial wave of the siege and failed, the soldiers had been able to put up meaningful resistance within the fortress's corridors, where they could outnumber their foes.

Just maybe, if the fortress's entire garrison had faced off directly against Juumonji, they might have been able to take him down. That

would have come with heavy casualties, though, and Juumonji would never have taken on such a fight. The soldiers wouldn't have been able to draw their arrows against a savior, anyway.

In any case, the armed forces of this world were more powerful than I'd thought they were. With this, we could keep casualties to a minimum and cross the Woodlands. Once the soldiers who had been injured during the battle against the lesser hydra were treated, the halted line of manamobiles began moving again.

We had to wait for all the other vehicles to get going since we were last in line. Seeing that I had nothing to do, Asarina poked her head out. I kept her company as she appealed to me as if saying, "Play with me! Play with me!" Not long after, I heard a groan from my side.

"What's up, Lily?"

"I was just thinking of how it's not going as well as I'd hoped."

Lily was looking down at her right hand in her lap with a serious expression. I had no idea what she was talking about. Just then, a sudden change occurred at her fingertips.

"Huh...?"

Her slender fingers grew larger, and bristles covered the skin. It was a bear's paw. I could tell this was the hand of a rough rabbit, a monster from the Depths.

"Ugh," Lily groaned. Her bear hand began wriggling about as if something inside of it was going wild. Lily lightly bit her lip and knit her brows, seemingly unable to control it. "Ah?!"

In the next instant, Lily's hand burst back into slime form.

"A-Are you okay?!"

"Mm. I'm fine, I'm fine."

I grabbed her wrist in a panic. A slimy mass swelled up but returned to the shape of a girl's hand after a little bit of time. I held her hand with both of mine and let out a sigh of relief.

"What was that?" I asked.

"An...experiment? Oh, Master, the manamobile in front of us is moving." Lily waited for me to get the vehicle moving, then began explaining. "It seems my mimicry has a limit."

"A limit?"

"Mhm. I can only mimic one type of monster at a time."

"Haven't you gone half-slime, half-human before?"

"Master. The slime is my actual body, not mimicry."

Lily raised her hand and changed her fingers into slimy feelers.



Now that she mentioned it, I had never seen Lily change a portion of her body into anything other than a slime while mimicking a human girl. That wasn't an act of mimicry; she was merely undoing a portion of it. That was what made it possible. I watched her wiggle her feelers around as I convinced myself of this.

"I have, of course, been using the abilities of other monsters while in this form. That's where the firefang's sense of smell comes from, and I've also been using the physical strength of a rough rabbit. Even the fire and earth magic I can use now is done like that. But no matter what I do, the abilities deteriorate because of this."

"They deteriorate?"

"Yup. I can bring out eighty percent or so of a monster's ability when using their form. If I do it in some other form, that could be up to sixty percent, but it'll typically be somewhere around forty percent, I guess? There's also specialized abilities I can't bring out at all in this form."

Lily's mimicry couldn't perfectly replicate the abilities of the monsters she copied. I knew this beforehand.

"Mimicry isn't the real thing. There's a gulf between fake and real that can't be crossed," Lily said in a hushed voice. "But I can't give up just because of that, right? If I can't cross that boundary, I simply need to figure out a way to make it work without having to."

"And that's what that partial mimicry was about?"

It made sense now. I didn't ask why she was suddenly thinking of such things. Rose wasn't the only one who'd felt danger after having witnessed the power of cheaters. Lily was also pondering ways to improve. Rose had suggested learning martial arts, whereas Lily was thinking of leveraging her specialty as a monster. I couldn't be negligent while my servants were trying so hard. I had to put in multiple times the effort as their master.

"Hey, Master?" Lily muttered, almost as if she was talking to herself. "Going by that logic... Why can't I use cheats?"

"Huh?"

"I really am just a..." In the middle of speaking, Lily noticed something and suddenly began blinking. "Master. Over there."

Lily pointed at the abrupt change in scenery. Unending lines of trees had surrounded us all this time, but we now came upon a sturdy wall made of stone. A deep moat and an embankment encircled it. It wasn't quite the size of Fort Tilia, but this fort-like appearance wasn't what I was expecting. We had finally arrived at the nearest reclamation village to Fort Tilia.

Chapter 5: The Knight and the Savior

A shrill whistle rang in the air. It was the warning alarm from the guard on the watchtower. Men in imposing outfits appeared one after the other, manning the ramparts surrounding the village. I'd been told the army was stationed here. These men were in all likelihood soldiers. Taking a closer look, they had the same equipment as the ones who were accompanying us.

This made the ones who came out after them the town watch. Their armor looked battered; the metal parts were worn out and showed signs of frequent repair. Many of them were equipped with what looked like hand-me-downs from the army, but some were wearing homemade leather armor. Their weapons lacked uniformity, but all of them looked well-maintained.

Now then, it was good that we'd arrived at this village, but there was no sense in intruding with such large numbers and making them wary of us. It was decided that the commander and a few of her knights would head in first to explain the situation.

Their meeting concluded seamlessly. From what I heard later, the knight who'd left ahead of us as a messenger managed to arrive several days earlier and had already provided a simple explanation. After the talks were over, about half the remaining knights were invited into the village along with the students. The village didn't have the capacity to house close to five hundred personnel.

Shiran came by to get me, and I rode our manamobile into the village. The walls were made of stone, but the village's bungalows were made of wood. We went down a path that ran between vast fields, passing through several gates and defensive walls.

When I looked at the fields to my sides, I could see several villagers gathered together sporadically watching us pass by. It seemed they were aware that we were visitors from another world—their saviors, in their minds at least.

Anxiety and curiosity were compounded with longing and faith. Their gazes felt uncomfortable. Shiran sat by my side at the driver's seat, serving as our guide. She started telling us about the general details of reclamation villages, perhaps out of consideration when she sensed what was going through my mind.

“Reclamation of the Woodlands begins by building walls within the cleared-out territory. Stones are imported from far away quarries

to build a sturdy defensive perimeter. As the reclamation progresses, more walls are built for expansion. That's how the village grows little by little."

"Oh, so that's why there are several layers of walls?"

"Precisely. The imported stone is used primarily for the walls, so the houses are generally made of wood, which is in extreme abundance. Several times a year, the army arranges the sale of excess lumber obtained through clearing the Woodlands."

"Meaning the villages make their livelihoods through forestry?"

"Yes. The Woodlands' soil is poor for crops. It's said this is because the dense mana within the earth gets in the way of anything growing aside from the trees. Because of that, the harvest from any field is minimal. They make up for the deficit in food by purchasing it elsewhere using the money from the lumber sales."

"Is your hometown also like this, Shiran?"

"Indeed. It's only about a fifth of the size and somewhat poorer, but the atmosphere is similar," Shiran said with a fond smile, recalling her own hometown. "This village serves as a stopover to Fort Tilia, so it's on the larger side for a reclamation village."

As we talked, attracting the attention of the villagers all the while, our manamobile gradually made its way forward. There was no way they could guess there were monsters inside. The village was unaware of my circumstances. We were just passing through, so it had been decided that there was no need to go out of our way to sow the seeds of chaos. The only ones entering the village were the Alliance Knights, so we didn't have to worry about someone divulging my secret. Even if the village were to find out, they couldn't do anything about it, considering the large force we came with.

We arrived at a two-story building near the center of the village. It was a little more glamorous than the other buildings we saw and had a signboard hanging from its roof. Shiran told me it was an inn for travelers that also served as a tavern. I left the vehicle to her and got down with Lily.

"Hey there, Majima. Long time no see," Miyoshi Taichi said. His group of friends who'd managed to survive Fort Tilia were just getting out of another manamobile. "I watched you guys on the way. You played a big part in protecting all the soldiers, huh?"

"Well, more like Lily did. I didn't do anything."

Miyoshi had come over on his own to talk. After the attack on Fort Tilia, my servants and I had kind of been in hiding, and we hadn't had much to do with the other students during the journey, so it had been about half a month since Miyoshi and I last spoke.

"How are they doing? They're looking pretty pale over there," I asked, casting a gaze at his exhausted friends.

“Oh, don’t worry about them. They’re just carsick,” Miyoshi replied with a wry smile.

The knights called us over and we entered the tavern. The spacious room was lined with tables. Two of Miyoshi’s carsick friends went to the rooms on the second floor to get some rest, while Lily, Miyoshi, a girl called Tada Ryouko—the remaining member of Miyoshi’s group—and I took a seat at a table. Black speckles stained the tabletop from long years of use. This was probably where the villagers spent their free time. Unfortunately for them, the place was cleared out today and nobody could enter.

The knights who came in with us declined to join us at the table, saying it was their duty to be on guard. They carried over four portions of food. They were simple meals of bread and root vegetable soup. There were also spirits available, but I declined. Lily could probably drink, but she refused, seeing that I wasn’t having any either.

I checked with Shiran when she came by, and it turned out she’d made preparations for the same meals to be sent out to Gerbera and Katou, who were still in the manamobile. Kei was taking them their food while the Alliance Knights were watching the surroundings. There was no need to worry about them encountering the villagers. As such, I didn’t hesitate to start my meal.

The only ones who spoke as we ate were Miyoshi and me. I’d had breakfast together with Miyoshi’s group one time at Fort Tilia, but the mood had been completely different back then. They knew that Lily was a monster now. They didn’t know how to take it. Miyoshi avoided speaking with her, whereas Tada didn’t speak at all.

Miyoshi told us stories about the imperial capital the entire time. He’d heard them from the soldiers on the way. Having just survived the incident at Fort Tilia, it wouldn’t be unusual if he were worried about the same thing happening in the future.

In the middle of our meal, the commander came by leading a few knights. She also brought an old man who served as the chief of this reclamation village. He welcomed us so formally he was practically prostrating himself before us. This felt uncomfortable, so I quickly finished my food to give myself an excuse to leave. Thankfully, the commander understood this part of my nature, so she arranged for us to be shown to our room right away.

“Tired?” Shiran asked with a smile when I entered the room and let out a huge sigh.

“Just a little. It’s mostly mental fatigue.”

“There’s a public bath in the village. How about going in with Lily? I’m sure they will allow you to use it if we ask.”

A knock came at the door just around that time.

“Excuse me for interrupting your rest, but may I have a moment?”

It was the commander, accompanied by Mikihiko. She started by thanking us for protecting the soldiers from monsters along the way, then cut straight to business.

“Our original plan was to leave this village right away, but there’s been a small change to our schedule.”

“Meaning?”

“We’re thinking of staying here for the entire day tomorrow. To that effect, I would like to have your consent as well.”

Continuously walking through the Woodlands for several days while keeping watch for potential monster attacks had exhausted the soldiers more than expected. Furthermore, there were fears that Fort Tilia’s abandonment would lead to an increase in monster attacks on this village. There were already signs of this happening, and this had the villagers uneasy. So while the soldiers rested for the entire day tomorrow, the commander was going to lead a portion of the knights who could still fight to suppress the monsters in the vicinity.

“Understood. If you’d like, Lily and I can participate as well.”

“I could ask for nothing better. Please do.”

A smile came to the commander’s tired face. She then explained the details of the area we were planning to patrol tomorrow. We were to enter the forest in the early afternoon. That being the case, I decided to make a request.

“If we have the time in the morning, then I’d like you to help Rose and the others with some training, Shiran.”

“Like we discussed earlier? I don’t mind, but...”

Shiran looked to the commander, who nodded back to her. “I don’t mind either. We’re very much indebted to Takahiro, including tomorrow’s patrol. I don’t have any work for you before that. Do as you wish.”

“Very well. Then, Takahiro, I shall gladly undertake your request.”

“Great. Thanks, Shiran,” I said with a smile before adding one more thing. “Oh yeah. If we have the time, could I get some training too?”

“Oh? You gonna train, Takahiro? If so, maybe I can join in too? I’d like to try using a longsword a bit more,” Mikihiko said, raising his hand.

Seeing him like that, the commander smiled faintly. A harmonious air flowed through the room...but one person was reacting differently. For some reason, Shiran’s expression took a complete turn. A deep crease formed between her eyebrows.

“What’s wrong, Shiran?” the commander asked.

“About that, Takahiro...” Shiran trailed off. Her gaze wavered. She clenched her fist by her chest and pursed her lips. “Perhaps this is a

good opportunity to tell you,” she muttered, then looked me in the eyes with determination. “Takahiro. Just as I said, I will undertake your request to train all of your servants. I also do not mind training Mikihiko. However, could we put a stop to your own training?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, staring at her quite rudely without meaning to.

It would be one thing if she didn’t have the time to help us with training, but helping all of my servants and Mikihiko while leaving me out didn’t make any sense. I thought she was maybe joking, but her single blue eye looked entirely serious.

“Takahiro. You shouldn’t fight any longer,” she said.

“I’m not really fighting because I want to...” I didn’t understand what she was getting at. I couldn’t hide the bewilderment in my voice. “But I can’t just back out, can I? If I don’t brush off the embers falling down on me, I’ll get burned. To avoid that, I need to acquire the strength to fight.”

“Even if the simple act of acquiring said strength is a danger in and of itself?”

Lily twitched at those words. She couldn’t possibly overlook a statement suggesting some sort of danger to my well-being.

“Hey, Shiran. What do you mean?” she asked stiffly.

“Exactly what I said. Takahiro’s abilities carry a risk.”

“Wait, hang on a sec,” I said, cutting back into the conversation. The things she was saying were arbitrary and troubling. I spread my arms in protest. “What do you mean risk? How exactly am I in danger here?”

“I see. So you truly haven’t paid it any mind yourself.” Shiran’s eye focused on my outstretched left arm. Asarina, who was languidly stretching out from there, jumped with a start. “And where in the world can you find a human with a monster growing from their hand?”

“Well... I mean, if it’s just a matter of appearance...”

“It isn’t a simple matter of appearance,” Shiran said with conviction. “Has your left arm not been affected in some way from having Asarina dwelling within it?”

In this case, my silence was the same as admission. I couldn’t refute her. Immediately after Asarina was born, I felt discomfort in my left hand. It was pretty natural. Her roots were spreading through my muscles. It would be stranger for my hand *not* to be affected. At first, I figured the discomfort would disappear over time. It still could, but...I couldn’t forget what I had done.

I accomplished the movement technique I’d used many times during the siege of Fort Tilia by having Asarina’s roots stretch halfway up my forearm so that she could pull my body. However, her roots

going through my wrist did obstruct my mobility somewhat. Furthermore, the human arm turned out to be a sensitive organ. The deeper her roots dug in, the larger the side effects. This was unavoidable.

“Holding a shield is one thing, but you can’t use your arm for more dextrous work already, right?”

“How sharp of you...” I said, smiling bitterly. Lily and Mikihiko looked at me anxiously. I shook my head. “It’s not a big deal. My fingers are just a little clumsier. I’m right-handed anyway. In terms of pure strength, my left arm is actually stronger.”

“That’s not all,” Shiran continued, maintaining her serious expression half-hidden by her eyepatch. “If it was, I wouldn’t be telling you this. However... Do you remember, Takahiro? When I first helped you with your training at Fort Tilia, I told you that the way you use mana is peculiar.”

“Yeah... Now that you mention it, you did. What about it?”

This happened on the second day of my stay in Fort Tilia. Shiran had mentioned it when she saw the way I used mana to strengthen my body. At the time, I had been hiding my ability, so I’d broken out in a cold sweat thinking she had found me out.

“I’m convinced now after hearing of it more in-depth. The way your mana flows when you strengthen your body is the same as the legendary Great White Spider. It’s peculiar but perhaps natural in this sense.”

“Yeah. That’s right. I learned how to use mana from her in the first place...”

“That’s the problem, Takahiro.”

“What?”

Shiran dove into the details as I grimaced. “Takahiro, you’re aware that the rings we knights use to identify ghouls work by distinguishing the difference in mana flow between humans and ghouls, correct? Ghouls have a characteristic flow to their mana. This also applies to humans and any other monsters. We say ‘characteristic’ because it cannot be replicated. By all rights, that should be the case.”

Now that she mentioned it, Rose had said something similar quite recently. No one, not even another species of monster, could use a monster’s inherent abilities. Only that species of monster could replicate the particular flow of mana needed.

“Do you remember the other thing I mentioned when I first saw you use mana?”

“I think... Normally, mana doesn’t flow that way?”

“Exactly. It should be impossible for you to imitate Gerbera’s mana flow.”

I could do something that Shiran claimed was impossible... This

was what she viewed as a problem, apparently.

“Most of the mana inside me comes from Gerbera, so...”

“Even so. Mana lies within the soul. The souls of humans and monsters differ greatly. Mana flows through the soul, meaning if the flow changes...”

Shiran’s gaze was keenly suggesting her remaining words.

“So that’s what you’re getting at.”

I let out a long sigh. Thinking back on it now, the girls had even treated me using a mana transfusion. All of the mana in my body had been swapped out with Gerbera’s for a moment. It was possible that some sort of irreversible change had occurred back then. Combined with Asarina’s roots digging through my body, it might’ve been a major turning point in my life.

“At this rate, I might turn into a monster. Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“I wish that was all,” Shiran replied, her blonde hair swaying in the air as she shook her head. “Takahiro, I do not know what will happen to you. Nobody does. It’s possible you could turn into something that is neither human nor monster.”

“That’s quite the horrifying claim.”

“This isn’t a threat, Takahiro. I truly do not know what could happen if you continue,” Shiran said, her eye piercing through me. “That’s why I believe you should relinquish your blade.”

Due to the peculiarities of how it worked with each of my servants, the mental path didn’t convey much emotion when it came to Shiran. Nevertheless, I could tell she was truly worried about me from her earnest expression. I felt a little sorry for this, but my response had been decided ever since that night I spent with Lily in Fort Tilia.

“Sorry, but I can’t accept that.”

“Takahiro!”

“If I continue being nothing more than a burden, any of them could get killed by no fault but mine. It would be too late to regret things then. I don’t ever want to think, ‘If only I’d done that,’ after losing someone precious to me.”

This was a worst-case scenario I didn’t even want to consider. It was the one situation I had to avoid at all costs. I’d already experienced the loneliness of losing everything at once, so I strongly refused to let the bonds I’d acquired slip through my grasp.

“Having said that... It’s not like I want to walk the path to my own destruction,” I continued. Even if I ignored Shiran’s extreme suggestion to withdraw myself from battle entirely, I needed to treat this change occurring to my body with more caution. “This involves my own cheat. Visitors from afar understand their abilities by instinct.

As long as I'm careful, I should be able to sense the dangerous line before I cross it."

For example, I was fully convinced it would be okay to acquire more servants through regular means. In contrast, when Gerbera had supplied me with mana, when Asarina had grown inside my body...and when I'd made Shiran my servant, I had known there were risks from acting so recklessly. It was important to fully ascertain my own limits. I was grateful to Shiran; her warning had taught me this.

"I could've continued doing unreasonable things without knowing it if you hadn't pointed this out now. Tha—"

My gratitude got stuck in my throat.

"Please reconsider, Takahiro."

Her earnest voice struck my ear. The violent gale of her emotions startled me. She gazed at me with her blue eye. It was like a sapphire flame. Our mental path didn't normally convey much of her emotions, but right now, it told me of the passion in her heart. I could feel a burning zeal within her that wholly contrasted with her cold, undead body. It felt like she could lose herself to such heat.

"Shiran...?"

What drove her to this extent? Right now, it almost felt like she was cornered by something... It was uncharacteristic of her.

"Takahiro, you—"

"Stop, Shiran," the commander said calmly, cutting her off before she said anything else. "Takahiro has already made his resolve. It isn't for you to undermine."

"But Commander!"

Shiran turned around vigorously to say something, but she held her tongue. The commander's calm gaze killed her momentum and brought her back to her senses.

Shiran quickly regained her cool and said, "My apologies... I lost my composure. I stepped out of line... I need to get some air." She bowed her head, then stood from her chair. "I shall teach you properly tomorrow, Takahiro."

"Shiran. If you don't want to, then I won't force you..."

"No. It's not that I don't want to. That's definitely not the case."

"Are you really fine with this?"

"Takahiro, you've already decided to fight, haven't you? Even if I don't teach you how to use a sword, you will still enter the fray. In that case, I would like you to at least learn how to fight properly." She looked at me earnestly. She was back to her usual reliable self.

"However, I'm a strict instructor, just so you know."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

"You wouldn't, would you? Yes... That's just how you are..."

Shiran smiled and left the room. The commander saw her off, then

lowered her head to me.

“Please pardon my subordinate’s rude behavior.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. I’m actually grateful.”

I thought something had been strange about her behavior, but after thinking it over, Shiran was pretty close to me in age. It was normal for her to lose control of her emotions once in a while. I couldn’t possibly complain when she was just concerned for me.

“It may sound strange coming from me, but please try to understand her. She truly is worried about you from the bottom of her heart.” The commander looked at me, an anxious expression on her tough face. “Takahiro, do you know what manner of existence we knights are?”

“What manner of existence...?” I asked, cocking my head.

“Indeed,” the commander replied in a courteous tone. “We are subjects of our nation, but we do not devote everything to our country. We are of course loyal, but that is separate from being a knight. The reason we take up the sword is different from the soldiers of the army.”

“Ummm?”

“In short,” Mikihiko said, cutting in, “chivalry here is different from the samurai code. Loyalty isn’t their pillar.”

The commander nodded. “Just so. We devote our swords purely to the ideals of justice and the salvation of the weak. In a sense, we are much like the saviors who descend upon this world... There are of course knights for whom this does not apply. There are those who prioritize fame, those who are corrupt, and recently, I’ve heard there are even those who are simply bloodthirsty for battle. Shiran is different from them, however.” She looked at me with an almost frighteningly serious expression. “She is a knight. I’d like you to keep that in mind, Takahiro.”

Her tone was earnest. That was how important this was to her.

“Understood,” I said with a nod.

“Thank you very much.” The commander smiled with relief. There was an unexpected amount of motherly affection in her expression.

“Please continue to take care of Shiran, Takahiro.”

Chapter 6: The Reclamation Village's Public Bath ~Katou Mana's POV~

"There's a common bath in this village. Would all of you like to go with me?" Kei proposed in an excited tone. She'd just returned from taking away the dishes.

"That sounds nice. Shall we then?" I answered.

Kei's face burst into an innocent smile. Her honest expressions were one of her charming virtues. Her pure little smile even made me want to smile myself.

She then looked over to Rose, who was working away with her magic knife. "Rose, how about you?" she asked.

"Me?" Rose's hands came to a stop as if she found this rather unexpected. "I'm grateful for the invitation, but I don't believe there is much meaning in me going."

Rose's body from the neck down was that of a smooth and hard mannequin. She didn't have any sort of human metabolism, so there wasn't much need for her to wash.

"B-But hasn't your body gotten dirty from the journey? You should also wash your hair."

"I don't mind just scrubbing my parts down in a bucket of water."

"Please don't put it like you're washing laundry..."

Kei was being quite fidgety, but Rose didn't have any ill intent. She had different sensibilities from humans. If she wanted to be clean, she could remove her arm at the shoulder and wash it whole. If needed, she could also completely remake any of her limbs.

Kei looked quite excited at the prospect of bathing with everyone, though. Seeing her shoulders droop, I decided to throw her a lifeline.

"Rose, I'm not sure that's the case."

"What do you mean?" Rose asked, turning to me with a cock of her head.

I held up my finger and said, "Come on, the day could come when you wash Senpai's back, right?"

"Wash his back?"

"Wouldn't it be awkward if you didn't know how to when the time comes?"

Rose sank into thought beneath her mask. With this, I just needed to give one more push.

"Besides, I'd also like to get into the bath with you, Rose," I

added.

After a brief moment of consideration, she said, "Very well. If you say so, Mana." Then she returned her gaze to Kei. "Seeing as this is a common bath, won't the other villagers be there?"

"Oh. That'll be fine! Shiran made preparations so that all of you can use it!"

Rose nodded. "Then there isn't a problem. What will you do, Gerbera?"

"Hm? Me?" Gerbera turned our way, Ayame still seated atop her head. "Hmm. It does sound rather amusing. I shall go as well."

I thought her reason for going was odd, but Gerbera gave us a nod. Thus, everyone left behind in the manamobile decided on going to the bath.



The building for the public bath was just about as splendid as the inn. According to Kei, this facility was a place for relaxation on par with the tavern. There weren't many places for amusement within the village, so having somewhere to heal one's fatigue was one of the few pleasures available to them. However, since this reclamation village was a stopover for the army on the way to Fort Tilia, these kinds of facilities were maintained with military funds. In general, they were a little more compact than this one.

Incidentally, the large quantity of water and heat required for the bath came from water and fire runestones installed in several locations. Majima-senpai often mentioned that the technology of this world took a different direction from ours. It wasn't necessarily less sophisticated, though.

After arriving at the dressing room, I took off the local clothing I'd been given at Fort Tilia. I folded them and placed them on a shelf by the wall. Rose watched my actions and copied me. After she finished, she took off her mask and placed it atop her folded clothes. Her face, which was previously damaged by an attack from a rough rabbit, no longer had a single scratch on it.

"Woow..." Kei said in a daze, looking up at Rose.

"Oh yeah. Is this your first time seeing Rose's face?" I asked.

"Y-Yes. She's really pretty, isn't she? A-Almost scarily so..."

I could understand where she was coming from. Without her mask, Rose was beautiful, like a cold and inorganic doll. She had decided that clumsy expressions would be unsightly, so she didn't make any expressions at all. This made her look even more like a doll. She was planning on unveiling this to Majima-senpai, but only after she'd smoothed out the uncanniness in her expression. That was going to take more time to accomplish.

"If it bothers you, then perhaps I should wear my mask after all?"

"I-It's okay!"

Kei shook her head as Ayame ran over to her feet. She turned around to see Gerbera was also there without her clothes.

"Woow..."

Kei's reaction was exactly the same as before, but that was to be expected. Gerbera's naked body was practically divine. Her nearly transparent white skin, unmarked by a single blemish, highlighted her balanced proportions. Her breasts were larger than average and swayed gently in the air. The womanly line of her back drew a beautiful curve, vanishing into white spider hair at its base.

"Everyone's amazing..." Kei muttered.

I was in agreement. I also considered the small Kei a beauty, though.

"What are you looking at, Kei? Rather, are you not going to undress?" Gerbera asked.

"Oh. Yes. Sorry."

Kei suddenly came back to her senses and got her hands moving again. She quickly took off her leather armor and clothes. Her exposed body was still that of a child without any real curves. However, perhaps because of her daily training with a sword, her body looked firm despite being rather slender. Her breasts, though small, were a little large for her age. Considering Shiran's looks, she was sure to become quite the beauty in the future.

"Okay! Let's gooo!"

Kei took the lead and headed toward the bath. A wave of steam pushed against us, followed by a voice from within.

"Oh. You all came here too."

Another guest had come ahead of us. Lily was all on her own inside a bath that looked large enough for all of us to fit in comfortably, including Gerbera. Seeing her wave our way, Kei's eyes went as wide as saucers.

"Hwah? I didn't know you were here, Lily."

"Mhm. I'm pretty sure I left my clothes out there. You didn't notice?"

"Huh? I must've missed them."

"I see. The dressing room is pretty big and all. Our master was here just moments ago too."

"Uh... Takahiro...? Waaah?!" Kei screamed cutely. "Th-That was close. We almost bumped into him..."

Seeing Kei turn bright red, Gerbera tilted her head curiously. "Is there something to be worried about if our lord sees you?" She was practically insinuating that she would prefer for him to see her as she walked up to the bath and dipped her finger into the water. "Hmm, so

this is a bath. This is my first time going out of my way to dip into hot water like this.”

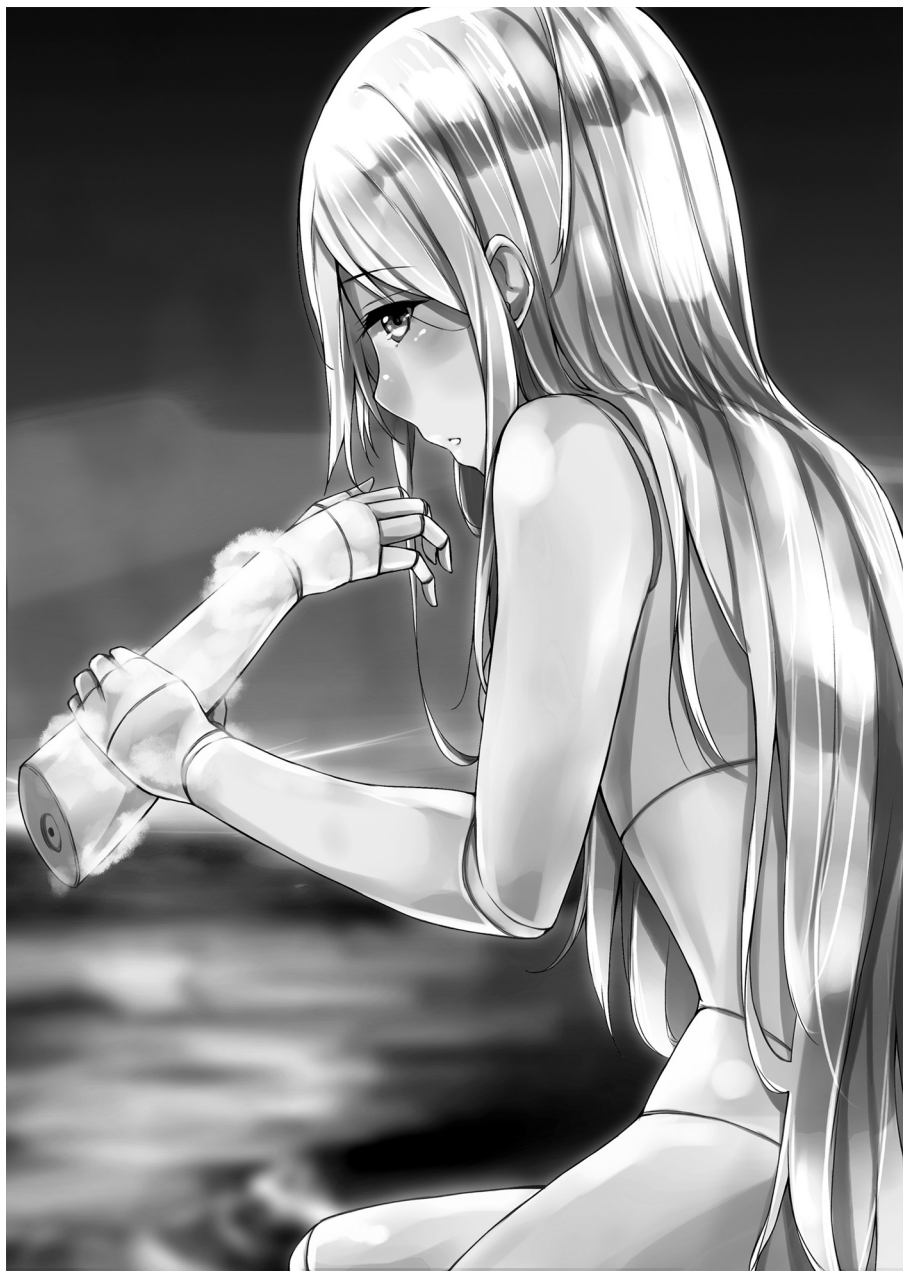
“Oh. Gerbera, stop. You’ll dirty the bath,” I said, holding her back.

I let her know that she had to wash off first, and I asked her to wash Ayame while she was at it. The little fox had no idea why we were here, but the moment she realized what was about to happen, she bolted off with amazing vigor...and was captured not even one meter away. We started to wash ourselves off as we listened to her cute yipping.

“Rose... This is a bath, so how about not taking your arm off to wash it?” I said.

“But it’ll get cleaner this way.”

“How about *not* taking your arm off to wash it?” I repeated.



“Very well... Oh yes, I must practice washing backs,” Rose stated.

“Huh? Oh, right. We did talk about that, I guess.”

“Weren’t you the one to bring it up?”

“Tee hee. I suppose I did. Then you can use me as practice.”

“Thank you very much. Your body is very soft, and your skin is so frail. I shouldn’t put too much strength in it, should I? Is this about right?”

“Yes. Aah... You’re pretty good at this, Rose. It feels great. Hee hee. It seems some people really are just good at anything... Ah! Wait! Rose?! My front is fine! I can do it myself! And please leave that part for Senpai to do when you bathe with him!”

“Hm...? This is practice to wash my master’s back, so shouldn’t I do it here as well?”

“Awawawawawa!”

“Oh, Rose,” Gerbera started, ignoring my plight, “after you are done, could I ask you to do the same for me? There are places my arms cannot reach.”

In any case... We all got washed off, despite a bit of a kerfuffle, and got into the bath. I gradually dipped my leg into the hot water alongside Kei, enduring the prickling sensation on my skin. Gerbera, however, showed no care for this level of heat and jumped into the water without hesitation, making a big splash.

“Hwah?!” Kei screamed.

I had no time to do the same, because Rose pulled me in and shielded me.

“Oh... Thanks.”

“I heated it up a bit since it was kind of cold, but maybe I went too far?” Lily said with a giggle.

She had been in the bath the entire time we were washing off, but despite having a sexy flush to her cheeks, she didn’t show any signs of dizziness. She had also been in there the whole time with Majima-senpai too... Monsters really were sturdy beings.

As I dipped in up to my shoulders, I suddenly realized something. Majima-senpai had been in this bath just moments ago. It didn’t really mean anything, but I was slightly conscious of it...

“What’s up, Katou?” Lily asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

I’d ended up attracting attention because I was thinking of useless things. I shook my head as she looked on curiously.

“Lily, you’ve been in here quite a while already, right? Do you like baths?” I asked in return.

“Hmmm. Seems so,” she replied, stretching out her arms in relaxation. “I can use fire magic now, and I could already use water

magic, so if Rose can fashion something like a big tub, we could probably even take baths while on the road.”

“It could also work if I make an imitation runestone for fire magic. Maybe it’s a good idea to make one while we’re at it,” Rose added.

“Hee hee. Maybe so. How about a hot spring?” I asked. “I wonder if they have them in this world. Hey Kei, do you know anything about them?”

The conversation livened up with Lily at its center. I stayed out of it, however. I merely watched in a daze. Her figure overlapped with a girl I had gotten along with very well. She had also told me she liked baths. We had even talked about going with everyone from the club on a hot spring trip at the end of the year. Our plans had gone out the window, though, after we were teleported here.

“Is something the matter, Mana?”

Rose seemed to have noticed the subtle change in my condition. She was looking down at me with her inorganic eyes, sitting shoulder to shoulder at my side. Her expression looked cold, but I knew full well just how much she thought of me.

“No, it’s nothing.”

I shook my head and leaned against the shoulder of the girl who always stayed by my side. It brought my emotional thoughts to an end. Anyone could love baths. The reason I even remembered such a trivial thing was merely because I was influenced by Lily’s appearance. There was no meaning to any of this. That girl wasn’t so well-endowed in the first place.

I lowered my gaze. Lily’s large breasts were floating in the water. Even though she had the same face, the two of them were totally different in this regard. Actually, it felt like an unfair standard for comparison. Hers were probably smaller than Kei’s. Mine weren’t really on the small side, but they didn’t compare to Lily at all.

I suppose Majima-senpai really does prefer big ones... If so, I guess we need to take that into account for Rose’s remodeling..

I was immersed in my thoughts when Lily brought the conversation back to me.

“Oh yeah, Katou. There’s something I’d like to consult you about. Can I get some of your time later?”

“With me...? Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Thanks.”

Lily was smiling as she always did, but her eyes had an earnest glint to them. She apparently had something fairly serious that she wanted to ask me about. Seeing that I figured this out, Lily flashed a grin. Then she suddenly turned her gaze to the door connecting to the dressing room.

“Hm? Someone’s here.”

Shortly after, Shiran entered with an, "Excuse me."

"Oh. Shiran. Are you going to join us?" Kei asked.

"I have something to do, so I'll enjoy myself later."

"Shiran, thank you for accepting my request to join in your training sessions," Rose said. "I'll be in your care tomorrow."

"Of course. I shall exert myself to the best of my abilities, so let us work hard together."

Shiran's eye casually wandered my way. I averted my gaze on reflex. I didn't mean to, but it would be awkward to look back now that I had. She seemed to find my unnatural behavior somewhat strange, but she immediately changed gears and looked elsewhere.

"Gerbera. May I have a moment?"

"Me?"

Gerbera's red eyes opened wide with surprise. This had apparently been the main reason for Shiran's visit. The two of them didn't normally have much in common.

"I have something I would like to speak with you about, so Takahiro and I will be meeting at the manamobile later."

Curious as to what this was about, the rest of us exchanged glances.

Chapter 7: The White Spider and the Otaku ~Gerbera's POV~

“Hrmmm.”

I let out a groan and folded my arms. I was outside the reclamation village, a short distance off the road in the forest. Our lord had brought all of us out of the village together. I couldn't see them from here, but Lily and Rose were receiving lessons in martial arts from Shiran a little deeper within the forest.

Lily would have been fine, but Rose had to avoid any human eyes. There was nowhere in the village for her to receive lessons, so we had to step outside. On the other hand, I was left racking my brains looking down at a variety of weapons lying on the ground in a line before me.

All of these weapons came from the armory in Fort Tilia. They had thought it a waste to leave them behind in an abandoned fortress, so they had packed as many as they could into the manamobiles. The majority of them belonged to the Alliance Knights, but some also belonged to the Imperial Knights who had been utterly annihilated in the siege.

The reason they were lying on the ground was related to why Shiran had paid me a visit yesterday. Back when they'd talked about teaching Lily and Rose, Shiran had said, “There are all manner of spears and axes, so how about taking a look at an assortment of them at once?” My lord had then commented, “In that case, how about you have Gerbera try out some weapons too?”

Lily and Rose weren't the only ones who sought more strength. That cheater who came from the same lands as my lord, Juumonji Tatsuya, had been a formidable enemy. It took everything I had just to hold him back. I was the strongest monster among my lord's servants. Thus, defeat wasn't an option for me.

I didn't hesitate to accept his suggestion. Using tools to quickly grow stronger was an idea characteristic to humans. When lacking in power, they devised ways of using tools to overcome their shortcomings. So, if I found myself lacking, it wasn't a bad idea to follow the same principle. This was all too unfamiliar to me, however. I was honestly troubled by my lack of knowledge in this area.

“Have you found anything you like?” Kei asked, stepping out of the manamobile next to me.

The little elf had a load of weapons in her arms. She was training to become a knight, so she was quite strong despite being a child. She was also familiar with weaponry, so she was helping me out today.

“Unfortunately not...” I told her.

“Hmm. So these are no good. We’ve looked at a bunch already, but nothing seems to click, huh?”

“Indeed.”

I picked up one of the weapons before me. It was a sword much like the one my lord used. I gave it a swing and grimaced. To put it frankly, it didn’t suit me. I couldn’t envision myself getting stronger by wielding it. My instincts from living as a beast for many, many years told me this wouldn’t do. These tools were made for human hands. Perhaps that was why they didn’t suit me.

This didn’t only apply to weapons either. For example, Lily and Rose were trying to learn martial arts, but it didn’t seem like I could get stronger by doing the same. Think of applying the same logic to Ayame or Asarina; neither of them could learn martial arts. In a sense, I was closer to them in this regard. An arachne’s upper body resembled a human’s, but it was actually the lower body that was important in battle.

My lower body was no different from a spider. The way it moved was altogether different from a human body. For me to learn this so-called underlying principle of the sword, Shiran couldn’t simply rearrange things to match my physique. She had to establish an entirely new form of martial arts from its very roots. It could easily take decades to accomplish this. We didn’t have that sort of time.

“You’re already complete as a fighter to begin with, Gerbera,” Kei said, lowering herself to her knees and placing the weapons in her arms on the ground one by one. “For example, it’s like a super first-class knight trying to become a mage without ever taking a single lesson. It’s not remotely efficient. That’s why we’re trying to find a weapon that already suits your fighting style, rather than try and conform your fighting style to a weapon.” Kei paused, then stuck out her tongue shyly. “At least, that’s what my sister said.”

“I’m sorry for making you keep me company with such work.”

“It’s fine. I’m about the only one with the time to spare. Besides, it’s Takahiro’s request,” she replied cheerfully.

“You’re about the only one, you say?” I tilted my head curiously. “Say, Kei, I’ve been meaning to ask for quite some time... Are you not afraid of me?”

The soldiers and knights accompanying us didn’t act openly hostile toward us. The knights were actually treating us nicely because of their commander’s orders. In fact, a few of them were nearby keeping watch so that nobody saw us. They were the ones who had

fought side by side with my lord at Fort Tilia.

However, that was, at most, out of respect for my lord. They trusted him. Acting friendly toward his servants was a different matter. Among all of us, only Lily, who couldn't be distinguished from a human by her appearance, could interact with the people of this world.

There was nobody else like Kei trying to proactively be friends with me. I'd only just realized this recently, but it was actually rather astounding. That was why I asked her such a question.

"I mean, you're Takahiro's servant," Kei replied with ease, picking up the weapons I had just been looking at and standing up with a cute grunt. "When Shiran turned into a ghoul, Takahiro told me to leave it to him. He wasn't lying. He really, really saved my sister. So..."

"I see. So you believe in my lord."

"Yes. That's why I summoned the courage and tried talking to Rose, and she was a good person...or, good monster? Anyway, you looked easy to get along with too... Oh." Kei was talking with a huge grin when she suddenly noticed someone. "Takahiro!"

Her happiness was evident. I could tell he was coming by his presence and turned his way as well.

My lord came through the trees, lending Mikihiko his shoulder. Both of them were supposed to have been exchanging blows with training swords and shields, but in contrast to Mikihiko, who was breathing raggedly, my lord looked to have a surplus of composure.

"Mikihiko is down for the count. Sorry Kei, can you look after him?" he said.

"Understood. Can you sit him down over there?"

Kei returned to the manamobile, the weapons in her arm clanking about with each step. My lord set Mikihiko down at the base of a tree, then turned my way.

"How's it going, Gerbera? Think you'll find a weapon that suits you?" he asked me.

"Unfortunately not. There are so many types it's making me dizzy..."

"Keep at it. Once you find something you like, we can have Rose make you one."

Just then, Kei returned with a canteen.

My lord got back up to his feet. "Okay then, I'll leave the rest to you," he said. "I'm going to go check on Lily and Rose."

"Y-You're going already, Takahiro?" Mikihiko asked, utterly exhausted.

"Shiran promised to see to my training, after all," my lord answered with a shrug.

"Hang on... I'll go too," Mikihiko said.

“You can’t do anything in your state. Come after you recover.”

My lord gave Mikihiko a forced smile and left him behind. He looked a little lonely, but there was no choice, seeing how my lord had things he had to accomplish. So, I decided to do what I had to as well. I spent some time picking up and looking at weapons when Mikihiko sat himself back up.

I’d had multiple opportunities to interact with my lord’s friend. Whenever he had the time, he would come to our vehicle and discuss all manner of things with Rose. The strange tools she had been making lately were likely due to his influence. Given the chance, I also spoke to him once in a while.

“That guy sure is energetic...” Mikihiko muttered, a tinge of emotion in his voice.

The two of them had known each other before coming to this world. It was clear there were many things racing through his mind when he saw my lord now.

“He is better at using mana than you, after all,” I said, placing the ax I had in my hand back on the ground and turning to Mikihiko. “Still, from what I’ve seen, you seem to have more talent for fighting.”

I’d had a look at their training earlier. With sword and shield in hand, Mikihiko had fought in an irregular manner with two floating swords using his inherent power. With that, he had pushed in on my lord despite being one or two steps behind in strengthening his body with mana. My lord had ended up pushing him back because of this gap in strength.

“I’m sorry to say this about my own lord, but there is simply a difference in natural talent.”

“Ha ha. So the legendary Great White Spider says I’ve got talent. Maybe I’m not just trash.”

“Right now, my lord possesses more skill with a sword, but if you become as capable as him in manipulating your mana to strengthen your body, I’m sure you’ll be able to catch up quickly.”

“Hmm, really? That’d be nice. I see. If I can match his strengthening, huh...? Isn’t that a pretty big hurdle?”

“Well, that’s true.”

The strength my lord had obtained was due to his experiences surviving in the Woodlands. It wouldn’t be so easy for Mikihiko to match my lord’s progress.

“Seems I won’t be catching up to him for a while... Well, I guess that’s kinda obvious,” Mikihiko said with a small sigh. “Honestly, when I heard about the training he’s been up to till now, I got a little freaked out... I guess he can’t protect what’s important to him if he doesn’t at least go that far, huh...”

Mikihiko was earnest. The eyes beneath his glasses showed honest

respect for his friend.

"I heard cheats are the heartfelt wishes of visitors given form," he continued. "I can really see it now. Your existences are miracles he wished for. Of course he'd be desperate to protect all of you. I can see why he pushes himself regardless of how others might view him. To have something so grand in his heart... Man... I'm kinda jealous."

I found something about this rather strange. "So you say, Mikihiko, but has your own power not manifested as well? Would that not make you the same?"

"My wish...probably wasn't as splendid as his was..." Mikihiko said, ruffling his hair and smiling bitterly. "I've got a pretty irresponsible nature and all. Rather than a wish from my heart, it was more like..."

"More like what?"

"No... Forget it." Mikihiko shook his head and stood up. "Okay. That's enough rest. I should get going. Thanks, Kei." He handed the water canteen back to her, then suddenly turned my way once more. "Oh yeah, Gerbera. About that thing you asked me for, I'm done, so you can have it now."

"Really?!"

I braced myself as Mikihiko nodded with a grin. "Yup. Here you go."

He pulled a white piece of paper from his pocket. Seeing the many thin parallel lines running across it, Kei came over with interest.

"Does that come from your world, sir?" she asked.

"Yup. It's loose-leaf paper. I don't have all that much left, so it's kinda valuable. I ended up splurging since this is Gerbera's request."

"A request...? Oh, there's a drawing on it... Wow! That's amazing!" Kei's eyes shot wide open as she looked at the paper.

Mikihiko scratched his nose proudly. "Well, yeah. I put my soul into that drawing. I'm super proud of it. I spent all night on it, so frankly, I'm kinda spent today."

"Is that perhaps the reason you were unable to put up a fight against Takahiro...?" Kei innocently asked.

"Ta ha ha ha! See ya! Gerbera, let me know if you need anything else."

Mikihiko laughed off Kei's comment and ran off.

"My thanks, Mikihiko! This will be a great reference!" I yelled.

I returned my gaze to the paper. There was a picture of a girl with long braided hair on it.

"It really is well drawn," Kei said. "I didn't know Mikihiko was a painter."

"He mentioned he was aiming to be an 'illustrator,'" I said, correcting Kei as I kept my gaze fixed on the drawing. "He also said, 'I

still have a long way to go. There's plenty of otaku out there who can draw like this with just a little skill."

"Hmm. I don't really get it, but being able to draw so well despite not being a painter really shows how rich the culture of Takahiro and Mikihiko's home is," Kei said in admiration. Then she cocked her head. "So...what is this? Mikihiko mentioned you requested this. Were you discussing art?"

"No, not at all. In truth, I've been asked to make clothes for Rose. I've had trouble deciding what manner of clothing to make."

Rose had made the request before we reunited with our lord, right before we got caught up in the large army of monsters rushing at Fort Tilia.

"I forgot about it in all the commotion, but I recently recalled her request. We're taking a fairly relaxing journey, so I thought it was about time for me to start working on it."

"And you asked Mikihiko for advice?"

"Indeed. I didn't know what manner of clothes would be appropriate."

"Ummm. Rose was the one to ask, right? Didn't she have any particular requests?"

"I completely forgot to ask her. There was a whole lot going on at the time."

A whole, whole lot...

"Gaaaaaaah!"

"Wh-What's the matter Gerbera?! You're bright red!"

I'd resurrected a memory I didn't want to recall. I cradled my head. Incidentally, the reason I still couldn't ask Rose about it now was because I didn't want to recall the case of that cocoon or egg or whatever it was, just as I did now.

"Nothing. It's nothing. For mercy's sake, please don't pry any further."

"O-Okay..."

I waved my hands at Kei as she sat there blinking in a daze, then quickly changed the subject.

"In any case, I chose Mikihiko for advice because he is my lord's friend. He surely knows the kind of clothing my lord prefers. As such, Rose shouldn't have any complaints."

"And that's what this is... Hmm. It's cute, isn't it? Does that mean Takahiro likes clothes like these?"

"Mm. It's supposedly clothing that all men in Mikihiko's world favor. What did he call it again...?" The words I was trying to bring up suddenly got stuck in my throat. "Hm?"

I raised my gaze from the paper. I heard footsteps. They didn't come from the direction the others were training in. Several presences

drew nearer from the road the knights were supposed to be keeping watch on. I thought they were maybe the knights themselves, but the footsteps were too light. Were they villagers from the reclamation village? No, if so, the knights would've stopped them. I ruminated over the possibilities and turned toward the oncoming presences as an excited voice struck my ear.

“Oh! There's really a monster here!”

There were three pairs of eyes staring at me rudely.

Chapter 8: The White Spider and the Puppet's Clothes ~Gerbera's POV~

Two boys and a girl appeared.

"You are..."

They looked familiar. They were visitors from another world, much like my lord. Their names were...what again? I didn't remember. It was possible I'd never even heard their names to begin with. I had never really gotten involved with them. Why were they here? I was bewildered more than I was suspicious.

"Holy shit. This is my first time seeing a monster up close like this."

The boys looked extremely cheerful as they stared at me. I didn't sense any sort of malice. Their attitudes were actually on the favorable side. However, mysteriously enough, I found their gazes strangely unpleasant.

"Wow. It's really a monster."

"H-Hang on, isn't it dangerous?"

"I'm telling you, it's fine. That's Majima's monster, right? That elf girl is here too. She would've been wasted already if it was dangerous."

The group came closer as they chatted. The two boys were red in the face. A peculiar stench emanated from them.

"I wonder if they're drunk...?" Kei muttered by my side.

I knit my brows. I didn't really understand what "drunk" meant, but I pretty much grasped the situation. The Alliance Knights had cleared this spot of people. Neither the soldiers nor the villagers could approach. However, the knights couldn't deny visitors—saviors. In fact, there were a few bewildered knights standing behind them.

It seemed the boys had lost their sense of reason. This was probably an effect of what they called "alcohol." Drinking too much apparently caused one to do things one normally wouldn't do. Having said that, I still didn't have a clue why they came here.

"What are you...?"

"It's really half spider."

I tried asking why they were here, but the boys weren't listening.

"Yo, check this out."

On the contrary, one of the boys came up right next to me and stretched out his hand. His behavior was so rude I hadn't expected it,

and my reaction was delayed. His presumptuous hand was about to touch my lower body, my spider half covered in white hair.

A man is about to touch my body? A man other than my lord?

I flinched. Physiological revulsion sent chills through my entire body. My spider hairs stood on end. My legs reflexively squirmed about, and then...

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

A reprimanding roar pierced through the silent forest.

The boy’s hand came to a sudden stop. Everyone present turned their gazes at once. A petite girl was stomping toward us, her shoulders squared back.

“Katou...?”

I uttered her name. Katou was supposed to be observing Rose’s training. She must have returned for some reason. Nobody was able to react as she came to a stop and glared at the boys who were trying to touch me.

“I said, what do you think you’re doing trying to touch a girl’s body without consent?!”

“A-A girl? It’s a monster.”

“So what?! She’s still a girl! Hammer that into your thick skulls and think about how absurd a thing it is you’re doing!”

The boys looked utterly daunted. Katou’s anger had blown the wind out of their sails.

“You little...”

They realized they had lost their nerves because of a girl, a petite one at that. The shame they felt was an indication that their reasoning was functioning properly again. Even I could tell their trivial pride was ablaze. Things were reaching a boiling point. Having sensed that, my legs skittered about as I straightened my posture. I planned on stopping them if necessary, even if I had to be somewhat rough.

“S-Stop it you guys,” the girl in their group said in a panic.

“Tada?”

“L-Let’s just leave, okay? We went too far. This is our fault.”

The girl’s eyes were fixed on the object hanging from Katou’s waist. It was a rather large knife. Rose had made it the other day for Katou’s self-defense. Its ultrathin blade was light for its size and had a dreadfully sharp edge. Katou’s left hand rested on its grip, the knife still sitting in its sheath.

“W-We’re sorry, okay?”

Katou maintained her imposing stance a short distance away from us, telling them to get out of here with her eyes. The other girl forced a smile and ran away, completely pale. The boys followed suit, despite looking dissatisfied. The knights, who looked apologetic, left after them.

I finally let out my breath. My spider hairs lay back down. They were truly a rude bunch. It was an unpleasant experience. Still, it was fortunate that things had ended uneventfully. If I, a monster, resorted to violence, no matter the circumstances, it would affect my lord's position. Even I could see this. It was all thanks to Katou's interference that we managed to get by without aggravating the situation.

"You have my thanks, Katou."

She didn't reply. I cocked my head and looked at her more closely. Her face, which usually looked innocent, was now deathly pale.

"Katou...?"

She didn't react to my calls and collapsed to the ground.



Fortunately, Katou's condition didn't appear to be serious. She had collapsed from feeling sick, but she said that she would get better with a little rest, so I let her lie down for a while. After Kei replaced the wet towel covering her forehead several times, Katou sat back up.

"Sorry for causing you trouble..." she said.

"So long as it's nothing serious," I replied. Humans were so fragile. Just watching her was bad for my heart. I let out a sigh of relief and shrugged. "That was quite rash of you, Katou."

From what she told me about this afterward, the reason Katou had come to a stop where she had was because she couldn't force herself to move even a step closer. The reason she'd had her hand on the knife at her waist wasn't because she had been ready to attack at any moment, but because she had been clinging to the object that my lord had gifted her and that Rose had made for her. She'd known she was being rash.

Katou looked a little awkward as she said, "Well...I thought it was just that important to step in," she said.

"I'm very grateful for that."

I could honestly admit to this. My legs had reflexively come to a stop. If Katou had not forced her way in, there was no telling how things would've ended up just one second later. I couldn't even claim that my body wouldn't have acted without meaning to. It would be one thing if I had jumped back abruptly, but it was entirely possible I would've shredded the rude boys to pieces. It sent shivers down my spine.

"It's understandable for a girl to reflexively lash out at someone of the opposite sex trying to touch her body..." Katou said with a wry smile. "But your specs are in another dimension; you might've ended up hurting them a little."

"Right...maybe a little."

I averted my gaze. We were viewing things with a different scale, but I decided to keep quiet about it.

Seeing my reaction, Katou continued with a slightly curious expression. "Well, I wouldn't really care if they'd gotten hurt. Regardless of their intentions, that was just sexual harassment. It'd do them good to feel some pain, but..."

"It would trouble my lord as a result."

"That's how it goes," Katou agreed with a nod. "It's a good thing it ended without incident."

"It is... What exactly was with them?" I grumbled with a grimace.

A crease formed between Katou's brows as well. "It's because they were drunk. They probably came out here without thinking it through." Her tone was clearly angry and directed at the thoughtless boys. "I think they look down on you and the others because you're Majima-senpai's servants, whereas they're visitors just like him. That's probably why they did something so rude, though the alcohol didn't help."

I suddenly recalled the two monsters who obeyed the other monster tamer, Kudou Riku. He treated those girls, who he called Anton and Berta, as nothing more than pawns. The reason I felt disgusted by those two boys was perhaps similar.

Presumptuous curiosity. Physical contact without a hint of consideration. It wasn't okay simply because they didn't have any ill intent. To put it bluntly, those boys only looked at me as an object. Visitors from other worlds didn't possess a deep-rooted hatred toward monsters like the citizens here did. However, that didn't necessarily mean they treated us as equals. Our fortuitous meeting with our lord was a blessing unlike any other.

"Although," Katou continued, "once they sober up, I'm sure they'll realize their mistake. They're not planning on picking a fight with Majima-senpai, after all. Besides, from what I heard, Miyoshi-senpai is actually a fairly good leader. This incident happened while he wasn't around, and if he finds out, he'll probably take action to preserve his relationship with Majima-senpai. In a sense, it might be a good thing to warn Miyoshi-senpai sooner than later. If such a thing happened to Rose, I'd feel too guilty to face her."

"You have a point there. Unlike me, Rose is calm. Even if such a thing were to happen to her, she might quietly allow them to touch her so as to avoid any conflict."

"Please don't say things like that. Senpai is the only one who can touch Rose."

Katou looked like she seriously hated what I said. She really was close with Rose.

"Hrm?"

I suddenly raised my head. Someone was approaching again. I stood up on reflex, perhaps because the recent events unknowingly had a lingering effect on me. Fortunately, it was needless anxiety on my part. The person walking toward us with well-regulated footsteps was an elf with swaying blonde hair, white armor, and an eyepatch over one eye—Shiran.

She was my lord's newest servant, but she had lived as a human before that, so he treated her as a friend rather than his servant. The rest of us emulated his behavior in this regard. I didn't see her as my new little sister, but as Kei's older sister and my lord's companion.

"Oh? Shiran? Why are you here?" Kei asked curiously.

"I heard from my subordinate that there was some sort of trouble here," Shiran replied with a grim expression as she looked around and walked up to us. "Though nothing serious happened, just an almost-quarrel, it seems to have struck a nerve with all of you. I came by to check up on you and apologize."

"There's no need to apologize, Shiran. The knights weren't at fault, and you weren't even involved," Katou said.

"But Mana..."

"I'm fine. I just got a little sick. Kei took care of me," Katou replied with a smile to contrast Shiran's stern expression. I found this strange. Katou's smile looked stiff to me. "Mm. I should be fine to move about now. Thanks, Kei."

"You don't need to thank me. I wasn't able to do anything..." Kei replied dejectedly.

"It's fine. Kids shouldn't worry about stuff like that."

Katou gently brushed Kei's head and stood up. Even from my perspective, she didn't appear to be forcing herself. She wasn't putting up a brave front; she really had recovered in such a short time. It had taken much less time than before. Perhaps this was a result of this rehabilitation of hers, the one that Mikihiko was helping with. Or perhaps her favorable relationship with my lord had a positive influence on her mind.

Shiran continued staring at Katou. Noticing her gaze, Katou's eyes widened in curiosity. She returned a pretty smile. "What is it, Shiran?" she asked.

"No, um, it might just be my imagination, but..." Shiran said, sounding a bit awkward. "I feel as if there is some sort of wall between us, Mana. Have I done something to offend you?"

This was what I had found strange myself, and it seemed Shiran was of the same opinion. Well, even I had noticed, so it was obvious to everyone else too.

"If I have, then I would like to apologize."

Shiran's attitude was sincere, embodying the virtues of a knight.

“No, you haven’t...” Katou began, but she came to a stop when she noticed me and Kei looking at her. Her eyes widened ever so slightly, and an ambiguous smile came to her lips. “Was it that noticeable?”

“Even I could tell,” I told her.

“Oh. That’s depressing.” Katou’s shoulders drooped. She turned to face Shiran. “Sorry. I wasn’t really self-aware...”

“Don’t be. There’s no need to apologize for it.”

“Is it a personal matter?” I asked.

“It’s something pathetic...” Katou said, smiling bitterly. “I’m happy he worries about me now. I’m happy he trusts me now. But if possible, I wanted to be the one who caused that change in him... That’s all...” She let out a sigh. “There’s no point in being resentful. My mind understands, but my heart is a different matter.”

Katou was being rather vague, but I felt like I knew exactly who she was talking about. She had been so happy lately that even I could tell despite being mostly dense regarding such matters.

“So, Shiran, I don’t hate you in any way. On the contrary, I like you. I’d be happy if we could get along,” Katou said amicably.

Even though Katou thought it was pathetic, she still got jealous. The human heart didn’t work the way one wanted it to. Regardless, she was trying to resolve her ill feelings in her own way.

I didn’t know how Shiran viewed this, but she suddenly smiled.

“I can understand your envy quite well... Of course I don’t mind. I hope we can get along as well,” she answered.

Katou broke into a huge smile. It was far more natural than before.

“According to Takahiro, you are trying to learn magic, correct? I may be able to be of assistance.”

“Really? Thank you very much. I finally managed to sense mana recently, so I was thinking it was about time to take the next step.”

“Then how about after dinner? I can drop by the manamobile.”

Kei cheerfully watched the two of them. I had been watching as well, feeling a bit of a chill, but now I was relieved. And just then...

“Oh yes...which reminds me,” Shiran said, placing her hand in her pocket. “I forgot to ask. Mana, do you know what this is?”

“Oh!” Shiran held out the scrap of paper I had just gotten from Mikihiko. “Where did you find that...?” I asked.

“I picked it up on the way here. It was blowing in the wind. I could tell right away it was something from another world, so I thought it belonged to Mana. Is this yours, Gerbera?”

“Indeed. It seems I accidentally threw it away during the commotion earlier.”

“I see. Then here.”

“My thanks.”

I took the folded paper and sighed with relief. That was close. I'd nearly wasted Mikihiko's goodwill. I had to be sure not to lose it again.

"Hm... Right. I suppose this is a good opportunity." I was about to put the paper away, but I suddenly turned toward Katou. "There's something I'd like you to look at."

"Me?"

I nodded deeply. "Mm. About the clothes Rose requested I make for her. I asked Mikihiko for some help."

"Huh...? Kaneki-senpai? Is that what that paper is?"

Katou's expression didn't usually change much, but right now it was strangely clear how questionable she found this.

"Hmm... Kaneki-senpai... I have a bad feeling about this."

"What are you saying? Mikihiko said he's proud of this, and Kei said it's cute. Have a look before you say such things."

"That's true. Okay, can you show me?"

"Mm."

I unfolded the paper and handed it to her. Katou looked down at it, and in an instant, her eyes shot open.

"Huh? A maid outfit?!" she screamed, pointing at the paper.



“Oooh. So you do know about this?”

I let out a sigh of admiration. It turned out this was some sort of famous outfit. Katou’s surprised expression was more than I’d hoped for. Mikihiko was my lord’s friend, so I had been right to entrust this to him.

“I am told this is something all men in Mikihiko’s world like. I’m sure my lord will be pleased with this. I should be able to satisfy Rose’s request.”

However, just around the time I was brimming with confidence, I cocked my head curiously. The only one with sparkling eyes was the young Kei. The other two reacted weakly, especially Katou. I wanted to think she was pressing her hand against her forehead because she was deeply moved, but it seemed this wasn’t the case.

“Isn’t it amazing, Shiran?” Kei asked excitedly. “There’s so much frills and lace! It’s so cute!”

“Y-Yes, there is, but is this not an excess in decoration? This is...clothing for an attendant, correct? I feel like it lacks practicality, and is a little too flashy...”

“Oh, now that you mention it... I didn’t give it that much thought.”

Hmmmmmm...? The conversation between the elven sisters, especially the off-putting impressions of the older sister, sent a cold sweat running down my cheek.

“The skirt is too short, and it shows too much cleavage. Perhaps it’s rude to put it this way, but I feel it is a little lewd...”

Did he actually set me up? No, no, no... That can’t be...

“Gerbera?” Katou called.

My legs jolted. I timidly examined Katou’s expression...and almost screamed in terror.

“Do you plan on making Rose wear this?” she asked.

Her quiet voice was actually terrifying. Her fists were trembling slightly.

Oh no... This one’s out of the question...

“P-Please calm down, Katou. I didn’t say anything about making this as it is.”

Flustered, I tried spinning excuses as Katou drew nearer with unsteady steps. She remained completely silent as she stared holes through the paper in my hand. I felt scared. Memories of what she’d done to me before were resurrecting, bringing on a bout of dizziness. I had to do something about this. That single thought drove me to try and say something, anything to calm her down.

“This is nothing more than a concept. In fact, given the opportunity, I wanted to ask your opinion, just as I am doing now. I

can't deny I wouldn't have shown you had the opportunity not arisen, and I don't have any other ideas... But...!"

"Actually, maid clothes might not be a bad idea, huh?"

I was curiously stunned. What had Katou just uttered?

"Give me that," she said, plucking the paper out of my hand.

"Ah."

She looked at it deep in thought.

"Are you being serious, Mana?" Shiran asked incredulously.

"Normal attendant's clothing would be one thing, but this is... I don't know how things are in your world, but would there not be problems wearing this on an everyday basis?"

"Please don't misunderstand. This isn't everyday clothing in our world either. I don't know about 'Kaneki-senpai's world,' though."

"Did the two of you not come from the same world?"

"Yes we did, but we think profoundly differently... I don't know much about it myself. How do I even put it? This is a uniform from shops catering to a certain kind of interest..."

I didn't really understand much of what Katou was saying, but there was one established fact here. It seemed I'd managed to escape the death sentence. That was all I needed to know. I let out a sigh of relief, then turned an earnest gaze toward Katou.

"Then it's okay to make this?" I asked.

"No. Out of the question."

"Oh?"

Struck down with a single stroke. Shiran was also nodding. So it was out of the question.

"This kind of cute, energetic, and perverted clothing doesn't suit Rose. She needs something more chic, with a mature design. Actually, this really is entirely out of the question. He put too much of his own tastes into this. He's probably laughing it up because he knows what he did..."

Katou looked exasperated as she neatly folded the paper and put it in her pocket.

"I'll put a draft together," she said.

"I believe that's a good idea," Shiran agreed.

Kei was also nodding repeatedly. This was the moment where Mikihiko's painstaking work filled with his manly passion was put aside. It was honestly a little sad to me.

"Using your threads will make everything white, won't it?" Katou continued. "It'd be nice if we could get some dyes once we reach a city."

"I can arrange for that," Shiran said. "The knights who deal in such goods should know of some shops."

"Thank you, Shiran. Oh yeah, while we're at it, it might be a good

idea to make some long gloves and knee-high socks.”

“Oh! That way we can naturally hide the joints on Rose’s body!” Kei exclaimed.

“Yep. If it goes well, Rose might be able to walk around town with Majima-senpai... Hee hee. This is getting kind of fun.”

I shrugged as I listened to their harmonious conversation. I felt a little bad for Mikihiko, but... Oh well. It wasn’t like his idea was outright rejected. It was a good reference point, so I decided I would thank him myself later.

For example, I could... Right, that’ll work. I thought of a great idea. I could send the outfit he’d designed to that gallant woman he was smitten with. Mikihiko judged my lord would be pleased if I made such clothes for Rose, so the same was sure to apply to the man himself. He would definitely be pleased by this.

“Okay then. Now that we’ve reached a conclusion, it’s about time to get back to it, Gerbera,” Katou said, bringing my thoughts of the future to a stop.

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

“I mean you should be choosing your weapon,” she said as if it were perfectly obvious. “I came back here to help you with that in the first place.”

Chapter 9: The White Spider and the Girl Who Continues Marching Forward ~Gerbera's POV~

“For reference, could you tell me your impressions so far?” Katou asked.

“Let’s see... For the time being, I’ve tried a sword much like the one my lord uses, but fighting while remaining conscious of the direction of the blade is difficult. I can do it, but I feel it would actually weaken me.”

“So a sword is no good.”

“I also tried an ax, but I didn’t really get a feel for it at all. I’m trying a spear now, but I’m not seeing much hope in it. I feel like it would be better to uproot that tree over there and swing it about.”

“You do know there aren’t trees growing everywhere once you leave the forest, right?”

“Can I not just carry one around?”

“I don’t even know where to start with that one...”

We went back to trying to find a weapon for me. Katou walked over to the manamobile with Kei, where all the weapons were stored.

“There’s quite a lot of variety, huh?” Katou commented. “I feel like I’ve seen all of them one way or another in movies and manga.”

“Is that so?” Kei said. “It seems there’s a fair number of weapons from your world that don’t exist here. For example...right. I hear your world has these warriors who have lived in the darkness since antiquity called ‘ninja,’ and they’re armed with ‘shurikens’ and ‘kunai’ and the like. It’s unfortunate, but we don’t have those here.”

“Who told you that...? Oh. I guess I don’t need to ask. I already know.”

“Ummm?”

“I’m sure he was just messing with you, Kei... Oh. Right. That might actually be something we can use.”

“Ninja?”

“No. This has nothing to do with that. Well, I just thought of an idea. Don’t worry about it. Let’s start by looking at what we have.”

The reason Katou had come here instead of watching Rose’s training was because she had predicted I would be having difficulties with my task. She truly had keen insight. Although, she likely never

guessed she would encounter those other visitors.

"I don't know whether your timing was good or bad," I said.

"I think it was good," Katou replied from within the manamobile. "Since they were looking down on you the way they were, it was best if someone in the same position as them turned them away."

I could hear the clatter of hard objects behind Katou's voice. In contrast to Kei, who had been randomly pulling weapons out of the pile, Katou was rummaging for something specific. Meanwhile, Shiran had already returned to my lord's side.

"Besides, even if they end up harboring some kind of grudge, it'll be directed at me, not Majima-senpai."

"That's a good thing?"

"It is. Seeing how I can't fight, there's not much I can do for him. If I don't at least do something like this, then I'm not sure why I'm even staying with him."

I turned to face the vehicle, but unfortunately, I couldn't see Katou from here. Instead, I saw Kei coming out with more weapons in her arms. I placed the spears and axes and such back on the ground. Kei retrieved these and replaced them with a new lineup for me.

"If I could at least awaken to some power as a visitor, it'd be a different story," Katou continued.

"A cheat? Now that you mention it, Lily seems to have the same thing on her mind."

"Oh, so you know about that? Actually, Lily came to me for advice about that yesterday. She was wondering whether she could use such abilities."

"Does it seem possible?"

"I wonder about that... I put quite a bit of thought into it," she said in a considerate tone. "Lily is only mimicking Mizushima-senpai; she isn't actually a visitor. She thinks this is the reason she can't use a cheat. She can't do something the real thing could since she's a fake. It's natural she'd think that way..."

"It's natural?"

"Lily has a bit of a complex about this. It looks like she conquered her anxiety of one day vanishing from Majima-senpai's side, but I guess an inferiority complex doesn't go away all that easily."

"Hrm? An...inferiority complex?"

Nothing Katou was saying made any sense. To me, Lily was the strong eldest sister who carefully watched over us. I couldn't even imagine her being worried about her own problems. Perhaps this was a front she constantly kept up, though. Katou was together with my lord before I became his servant. That was why she'd had the opportunity to see Lily's more immature side.

"What Lily's saying does make sense," Katou added. "It's true her

mimicry is unavoidably weaker compared to the original. What's more, Mizushima-senpai passed away before her cheat manifested. So even if Lily could reproduce it, there isn't a cheat there to begin with."

"That's certainly true."

"But there's also a point of uncertainty here," Katou continued. The clattering had come to a stop. "Just because Lily's mimicry causes some degradation, it doesn't mean 'she can't.' It's more 'she can, but it's incomplete.' I feel it's odd that the only thing she can't mimic is the abilities of visitors. Besides, though Mizushima-senpai didn't have any sort of cheat, she was a visitor, so she at least had the potential for one."

"Ummm... So, in short, is this what you mean? Lily's mimicry should be able to reproduce the ability of a visitor? Hmmm. If so, there must be some other reason she's unable to manifest some manner of power."

"I'm only thinking the possibility exists. I mean, I haven't awakened to any power either, right?"

"Now that you mention it, those boys earlier are in the same situation. So it's a little hasty to assume that Lily can't manifest a power because of her mimicry's limits."

"That's what I think. It doesn't hurt to scrutinize it some more..." Katou's voice gradually sounded like she was talking to herself. "A visitor's power is a reflection of that person's wish. So if there's no wish welling up from the bottom of their heart, or the feelings behind their wish are too weak, no ability will manifest."

I was reminded of my lord. There had been a time when he too possessed no power. Lily was the only one who knew of this time, but from what I'd heard, he had been in a terrible state when he first met her.

That was exactly why he had awakened to his abilities. Conversely, if he hadn't gone through such a thing, there was no way he would have gained his cheat. This gave me mixed feelings. Our lord's misfortune was, in a sense, connected to our happiness, not that he would want us to think of it in such a way. The misfortunes of the past were misfortunes. The blessings of today were blessings. He was here as he was now, and so was I. That was more than enough.

"The large majority of visitors probably don't have a wish strong enough to awaken to any power, but I don't think that's necessarily the case for all of them."

Katou seemed to be sinking deeper and deeper into her own thoughts. Her tone was sincere, conveying how seriously she'd considered this. That didn't only apply to this specific case either. Her mind was running at full speed regarding many matters. Something within her urged her to do so.

“Thinking back on it, there are some aspects of cheats I can’t really say I fully understand. Why do we visitors possess such abilities to begin with? No... Perhaps that’s the wrong way to put it...”

“Say, Katou?” I called to her.

“Oh... Yes? What is it?”

Katou suddenly came back to her senses. I didn’t know what I should do. A certain doubt came to mind when I looked at her, but I didn’t know whether it was proper to mention it. I concluded I could since this was Katou. She was much smarter than me. It was nonsensical for me to spin my thoughts uselessly about such things.

Thus, I asked exactly what was on my mind. “Why do you not pounce on my lord and ravish him?”

An enormous clatter and crash came from within the vehicle. It seemed Katou had knocked over the weapons she was carrying in a panic.

“A-Are you okay, Mana?!” Kei yelled from within.

I was quite worried, but Katou soon groaned, “I’m fine...”

I felt relieved and called out to her again. “Be careful when handling weapons, Katou. You can get hurt.”

“You’re one to talk!” Katou yelled, storming out of the manamobile. She was red right down to the base of her slender neck. “Gerbera? What exactly...did you mean just now...?”

“Hmm? Did I say something strange?” I asked curiously. “I would like to pounce on my lord. Are your feelings not the same?”

“You’re being too frank!”

“And you’re too flustered. I’ve thought this for a while now, but when it comes to my lord, are you not a little too easily shaken?”

“Ugh...”

Katou staggered. Behind her, Kei looked out of the vehicle with both hands over her bright red cheeks, muttering something about an adult conversation and hiding herself back inside. I turned back to face Katou once more. Me being calm while Katou was completely thrown off was quite the unusual situation. I was a little moved by this as I cocked my head.

“But as I see the current situation, my lord will not see you in such a way unless you pounce on him yourself.”

“You’re unexpectedly sharp, considering how ignorant you usually are...”

“I don’t believe sharpness has much to do with this, though. I am connected to my lord by our mental path, so I can tell just by looking at him closely. When it comes to passion for my lord, I don’t plan on losing out to any of my sisters.”

As far as I could tell, my lord didn’t see Katou as a potential partner. He wasn’t an unfeeling man by any means. He likely had a

vague inkling of her feelings. He showed no signs of arriving at the correct answer, however. Why was that? I recalled the sight of Katou collapsing when she had spoken to those men.

“Well, I suppose it’s only natural. Faced with a weak human who ends up like that just from speaking with men, it’s hard to imagine my lord ravishing you by his own will, even if he wanted to.”

“Sorry, Gerbera. Can you please stop using your own vocabulary like it applies to everyone else?”

“But that’s what it all comes to in the end, isn’t it? That’s why my lord is so far from the answer. It’s precisely because he’s so sincere and honest that he doesn’t consider acting like a beast even to the slightest degree. You could even say it’s almost taboo to him to view you as a member of the opposite sex.” I paused, letting out a sigh. “You should already know this without me mentioning it.”

This girl had soundly defeated me when I was the white arachne. Even now, I was a little scared of her. If it was something I could figure out on my own without help, I believed that she already had a firm grasp on it.

“That’s why I deign to ask. You have the same feelings as me, so are you really fine with this?”

I pushed my question on her once more, and Katou finally let out a big sigh as if resigning herself.

“The same feelings, huh? Let me just tell you now, I don’t really want to pounce on him like you do,” she said in a joking manner before smiling bittersweetly. “But I never thought you’d realize my feelings.”

“Didn’t I say so already? I don’t plan on losing out to any of my sisters when it comes to observing my lord with passion. However, you’ve watched him nearly as much as I have.”

We were looking at the same thing. It would be stranger not to notice her feelings. And, of course, I couldn’t leave her behavior unquestioned after realizing so.

“Why do you not convey this feeling in your heart to him?” I asked. “You once stood fearlessly before me. You couldn’t possibly have cold feet about this.”

“That’s exactly what it is, Gerbera.”

“What?”

Katou gave me a wry smile. It was quite unexpected. I had thought of her as fearless. She could even be described as a sort of monster. However, the girl before me was saying otherwise. Did I misread her? No, that wasn’t quite right either. When I first met her, she had certainly been a terrifying monster. But now she was different. Something had changed.

As I came to that conclusion, Katou smiled pleasantly. “There was,

in fact, a time when I was afraid of nothing. I had given up entirely. I lost absolutely everything, possessed absolutely nothing, and thus, I could do anything. That's why I wasn't afraid of you when you were our enemy. That's why I was able to be of use to him." Katou let out a sigh. "And yet...Rose told me...I couldn't give up." Her smile was now anxious yet happy. "Now, I'm afraid of doing anything."

"It looks to me like you're doing all manner of things just as you were before, though," I pointed out.

"Hee hee. You're right. It's contradictory, isn't it?" Katou nodded, then closed her eyes. "But what can I do? Because of Rose, Senpai has told me 'you really saved me' and 'thank you.' Seeing him happy makes me happy. His trust makes me happy. You get it, right? So I end up thinking I have to keep trying harder." Her smile faded as she put her hand to her chest as if checking on the emotion that lay within. "The human heart doesn't really work the way you want it to. Even though I gave up on everything, I now have a reason not to give up at all. That's why..."

"I see."

Meaning it was her cowardice that was driving her forward now. I let out a sigh. That was exactly why things would go better if she simply conveyed her feelings. But she couldn't. It was extremely frightening to her. She feared losing everything she'd finally managed to gain by pushing forward. She doubted each and every step. She needed time to muster her courage before she could tell him.

Regardless, she wasn't going to stop her continuous march. The puppet she had once led by the hand was now guiding her gradually forward. Her speed was truly vexing to me, but she was still advancing. As such, I really was still afraid of this girl. Both her body and heart were so weak, yet she was so strong. I couldn't understand how she could be like that. I suddenly smiled. I actually found this aspect of her quite likeable.

"I get it now," I said. A description of her behavior came to mind, and I gave her a quick nod. "You're a trainwreck only when it comes to my lord."

"I'm surprised you know that expression..."

"I heard it from Mikihiko."

"That guy..." Katou looked exhausted, her expression bitter. "Whatever. It's because I'm like this that I can be of help to Senpai in some ways... Anyway, how about this?"

"Hm?"

"It rolled out when I toppled everything over. Think you can use this?"

Katou came over and heaved up a heavy-looking weapon to me.

"What is this?"

It wasn't a sword or an ax. It had a pole about the length of my arm with a large metal ball atop it. There were sturdy looking spikes protruding from the ball, which made it look far more disturbing than a sword.

"That's a mace," Kei said as she came running over. "It's a weapon you use by bashing your opponents with the spiky end. There are many tough monsters that can't be cut with blades in the vicinity of Viscum, one of the Three Eastern Kingdoms, so they use these weapons a lot over there."

"Rose has only made bladed weapons so far. I bet you never considered using a bludgeoning weapon, right?" Katou added. "How about it? I personally think it'd be better than uprooting one of those trees as an impromptu club."

"That's true. At the very least, it seems I won't have to worry about which way the blade is facing."

I nodded as the weapon in my hand half-vanished from my mind.

With this, maybe I can do it...

I stepped back from Katou and Kei.

"Shyaaah!"

I strengthened my grip and swung the mace with all my might. The air turned into a gale and burst around me. I felt feedback in my hand and broke into a smile. This felt good. It felt familiar. Above all else, it was simple. And yet it was amusing how it had more depth than a simple stick.

By using the weight of the head, it easily built up centrifugal force. I could expect a fair amount of destructive power just by swinging it around, so if I mastered its use through martial arts, it would put it on a different level entirely.

"If I had to complain, then I'd say it's far too light." This was probably fine for human use, but it was insufficient for me. "I'd like something heavier. Longer too. I suppose we can consult Rose about that." A pleasant feeling ran through my chest as a smile naturally came to me. "He he he... This has gotten rather amusing."

"Um, Gerbera?"

"What is it, Katou? I've finally gotten in the mood."

I turned to her in discontent to find that she was frowning at me.

"Is the handle of that mace bent?"

"Uh..."

I let out a dumbfounded groan. I had gotten carried away and had used all of my strength, causing the mace to curve and leaving me in a complete panic.



After trying to force the mace back into shape and warping the

handle even more, we went over to my lord together to give him a report and apologize. It was quite the experience. Having said that, we did at least have a plan now. All that was left was to discuss it with Rose. Katou had also apparently thought of something and was making a move of her own.

Finding a weapon to use had been quite the ordeal. I couldn't hold back a long sigh. The fact that I had asked Rose to "just make something sturdy and heavy," leaving her at a complete loss over what to do, is a story for another time.

Chapter 10: The Road to the Trade City

The knights, with cooperation from the local villagers, successfully suppressed the monsters in the vicinity of the reclamation village. Zero casualties were suffered. Lily and I also participated at the commander's request.

There was, in fact, an increase in monster activity, leading to some pretty chilling encounters. However, with Shiran at the front and Lily supporting from the rear while also acting as my guard, along with the experienced knights, we managed to face everything head-on and cut our way through any threats.

It was also a valuable opportunity for me to accumulate combat experience. Unfortunately, I didn't find any new servants. But even if I had, it would've been difficult to explain to the villagers accompanying us, so maybe it was for the best.

After we finished our task, we returned to the reclamation village and stayed the night. Nothing of note happened that evening other than Miyoshi dragging his two friends over—the boys who had gotten drunk and acted out of hand—to apologize to us.

Come morning, we left the village behind. The villagers all gathered to see us off—to see their saviors off.

The commander had already sent news of Fort Tilia's fall ahead by horse, but we didn't know how quickly the Empire would be able to respond. Worst-case scenario, the people here would have to abandon this reclamation village and take refuge to the north.

Despite this situation, the villagers' faces were more hopeful than anxious. The advent of the saviors was upon them. What did they think forced the evacuation of Fort Tilia in the first place, putting them in these dire straits?

This gave me mixed feelings. The villagers didn't know of Juumonji Tatsuya and Kudou Riku's deeds. These details couldn't thoughtlessly be made public, so the commander had only reported that Fort Tilia fell because of a massive monster attack. I wondered how exactly they would look at us if they knew the truth. I couldn't help but focus on the gazes directed at us from behind as our manamobile left the village.



The commander left some of the knights who could still fight in the village to help prepare for the worst, so our journey was going to be a little more difficult. Luckily, the rest we got at the village, restoring our stamina and willpower, balanced things out pretty evenly.

The monotony of the forest scenery was going to thin out, but we still couldn't let our guards down. Our journey continued as we fended off more monster attacks. Three days after our departure, a sudden change occurred. I had expected there to be fewer and fewer trees around us as we got further. I didn't think the change would be so evident, however.

"The air's different..."

Something had vanished from the air—something that had constantly surrounded us, as if we'd been underwater but simply hadn't noticed because we'd always been submerged. The oversaturation had paralyzed our senses. Once it was gone, however, I finally realized. *That* was the Woodlands.

It was like those mana-dense trees created another realm. This was the reason some animals, like horses, steered clear of the Woodlands. They were sensitive to this change in atmosphere.

I left control of the manamobile to Lily and stood up on top of the driver's seat. Our vehicle had just started going down a slight incline as the brakes creaked to slow our descent. With my higher vantage point, I could see the situation in front of us through the lines of trees. The density of the forest decreased, revealing a large prairie spreading out to the front.

I could see what looked like a small reclamation village. Far in the distance, I saw a dense cluster of green. Was that a normal forest? Or was it one of those fragments of the Woodlands left at large that they called the Dark Woods? I squinted as the wind blew against me. Even the scent of the wind was different.

"Senpai, just now..."

As I stood there watching the scenery before me, Katou poked her head out from the carriage. She had also sensed the change. There was hope in her eyes.

I nodded back to her. "Yeah. It seems we're out of the Woodlands."

An air of relief spread out among the two columns of marching soldiers. The commander's voice, giving out orders to fire everyone up, even reached us all the way in the back.

"Finally..." Katou muttered, her voice containing a mix of emotions as she leaned forward onto the driver's seat.

Katou remained captivated by the scenery for a while. She didn't appear to realize she was much closer to me than usual because of the

way she was leaning forward. After we were sent to this world, we had been captives of the Woodlands. Now, we finally managed to get out of the forest. There was definitely a torrent of indescribable emotions overflowing from her heart.

Just then, Katou grabbed the hem of my clothes. She seemed to do so unconsciously as she stared at the prairie. If I pointed it out, though, she was likely to let go. Doing so felt like it would demolish this precious time of hers. Thus, I pretended not to notice and once more looked far off into the distance.

This road led to Lorenz County, to the trade city Serrata.



The survivors of Fort Tilia marched down the road, their steps much lighter. After exiting the Woodlands, we entered Lorenz County. From what Kei had told me beforehand, contempt for elves was particularly strong in these lands.

The southern part of the Empire, including Lorenz County, discriminated against elves more than the rest of the nation, which didn't border the northern Woodlands. Their dislike was probably a reason the elves were relegated to defensive forces.

In contrast, the Five Northern Kingdoms, including Kei and Shiran's homeland of Aker, had never discriminated against elves. However, these countries were basically half-engulfed by the Woodlands. Either way, elves had difficult lives.

Thinking back on it, when we were preparing to leave Fort Tilia, the commander had always handled the imperial soldiers with Mikihiko by her side, whereas Shiran had been devoted to leading the Alliance Knights. The majority of the Southern Imperial Army's soldiers came from Lorenz County. That was the reason for the division of labor between the commander and Shiran. In any case, we had to take this detail about the region into account.

Come nighttime, we set up camp a small distance away from the soldiers so as to avoid unnecessary friction. Kei stayed with us as our caretaker. Shiran and Mikihiko usually joined us, but they didn't come today.

"Kei, can you come here for a second?" I asked.

"What is it, Takahiro?"

Kei, who had been talking to Gerbera, walked over to me. She was carrying Ayame in her arms. The way the little fox lazily dangled her legs was ever so cute. But when she met my eyes, Ayame started flailing about. It seemed she wanted to come over to me.



I caught her as she leaped out of Kei's arms, her bushy tail shaking vigorously and her legs paddling in the air.

"I have something for you," I said to Kei.

"For me?"

"Yeah. Rose, please give her what you just showed me."

"Yes, Master." Rose nodded, then handed the object in her hands to Kei.

"We borrowed a few runestones from the knights for research, remember? We finished analyzing some of the simpler ones, so I had Rose use them as reference to make some copies."

The item Rose had handed her was a simply ornamented bracelet inlaid with a cream-colored imitation runestone.

"This is an imitation flash runestone," I said as I brushed Ayame's head.

"Huh?" Kei's hand came to a stop just as she was about to put the bracelet on. "By flash runestone, you mean the one-time use runestone?"

"Yeah. That one."

Some runestones were limited in their use. Flash runestones possessed no lethal force; they were only meant to blind their targets. One stone could create a powerful light, but it disintegrated after a single use. In that sense, it was different from an illumination runestone, though it also created light. The difference was in the base runestone's quality and the output level. The higher the quality, the longer it could hold out. The higher the output, the faster it was consumed.

Kei panicked and tried to return the bracelet. "I-I can't possibly accept something so valuable!"

Flash runestones didn't normally use high-quality materials, so they were relatively cheap in the grand scheme of things. Nevertheless, regular citizens recoiled at the price for a single-use product. This was no regular runestone, however. It was an imitation runestone.

"Don't worry about it, Kei. Rose made this from scratch, so there's no real material cost. You'll have to forgive its one-time use. She still can't make anything more than that."

The durability and output of Rose's imitation runestones were still pretty low. She was currently in a trial-and-error period, so these limitations were pretty much to be expected. Furthermore, there was one other technical limitation.

Runestones could be split into two categories: those that required mana from the user and those that didn't. The self-filling water canteen and the lighter were good examples of the former, whereas

the manamobile, which took mana from the land, was a good example of the latter.

The latter type of runestones were equipped with a function to absorb mana. An extreme example of this was the restraining device they used on prisoners who were thrown into jail. In our world, it was enough to disarm a person to render them powerless, but here in this world, there were those who could strengthen their bodies and manipulate magic with no weapons at all. They could break out of prison completely naked if they wanted to. This world had tools that could seal mana as a countermeasure against such people. If they tried to use mana, the restraining device would absorb and scatter it away. As such, once restrained, no normal person could possibly escape.

There were, of course, limitations. Living beings naturally resisted any external interference with their mana. So long as they were conscious and had the will to oppose it, then no one could apply the restraints and activate them in the first place. Also, the restraints weren't strong enough to capture a savior who specialized in battle, like a warrior. Nevertheless, such tools helped maintain public order here.

Unfortunately, these types of runestones had to absorb mana somehow, without regards to the function they were meant to fulfill. This made them too complex for Rose at her current stage of trials. She wanted to make her own manamobile, but that required a runestone that absorbed mana from the atmosphere and had the durability to constantly output power. She had been quite depressed to find that both of these were too difficult to accomplish as she was now.

“Okay, but why give it to me?” Kei asked. The way her hands nervously handled the bracelet was a little strange.

I smiled at this. “I heard elves aren't well liked in imperial territory. There's no harm in having as many means of self-defense as possible in case you get caught up in some trouble, right?”

“It's true that contempt for elves is strong within the Empire, but it's not like they'll suddenly start throwing rocks at us, you know? People aren't really oppressing elves in Lorenz County either... I've heard of such things happening in the Margraviate of Maclaurin to the north, though.”

“The Margraviate of Maclaurin... You mean Elf-Hater Maclaurin?”

I was gradually learning more and more about this world. According to Kei's lessons, three highly influential noble houses that also possessed great military strength managed the nobles of the Empire's southern region.

Margrave Maclaurin was one such noble. His territory was vast, matching his grand title. According to the map I'd seen of the region

north of the Woodlands, it was bigger than the Five Northern Kingdoms combined. Even if these kingdoms were all small countries to begin with, it was a little odd for a single noble to control more territory than all of them together. The territories of the Empire's grand houses were basically countries of their own.

Mikihiko had described the emperor as the most powerful noble. He had an ancient and honorable bloodline, and he was uplifted by the savior-worshipping Holy Church. Mikihiko had emphasized the last point, which meant if the church had problems with an emperor, they could simply swap them out for a new one.

This viewpoint was characteristic of Mikihiko, who hated the concept of saviors and hence saw the church in a poor light. He did describe the essence of things pretty well, though. There was in fact a precedent of the church backing another noble to usurp the emperor.

The Empire's nobles possessed great power that sometimes even surpassed the emperor. The Margraviate of Maclaurin wasn't merely vast; it was home to multiple mines that produced unprocessed runestones, so it was in terrific economical standing as well. It didn't directly border the Woodlands, so the threat from monsters was relatively low, meaning its large military force backed by extensive financial support suffered very few casualties. His slanderous nickname, Elf-Hater Maclaurin, came from his open contempt for elves as a powerful southern noble. He had no need for their strength, and hence treated them poorly.

"After we finish our business in Serrata, we'll leave Lorenz County right away and return to Aker," Kei said. "We don't have any plans to go as far as the Margraviate of Maclaurin, so there's no need for such worries. Soldiers from the margraviate are typically dispatched to Fort Ebenus, so they don't have anything to do with Fort Tilia, anyway."

"That might be the case, but still, there's nobody who can help if something happens while we're in the Empire, right? It won't hurt to carry it. You've been a great help to us in many ways, so think of it as a thank-you gift."

Kei looked somewhat troubled, seeing that I had no intention of backing down.

"Isn't it fine to accept his present?" Katou said, slapping both of Kei's shoulders and peeking at her face. "Senpai is just worried about you... I think he's being a bit of a worrywart, though."

"Tee hee. You're right."

Katou smiled as she watched Kei gently hold the bracelet to her chest. Seeing Katou like this, I raised a brow.

"Why are you talking like this has nothing to do with you?" I asked.

"Huh?"

“I’ve got one for you too.”

I glanced over to Rose, and she held out another bracelet to Katou.

Katou’s eyes widened in shock. “You just gave me this knife the other day...”

“Didn’t you hear me? There’s no harm in having as many means of self-defense as possible.”

I didn’t forget the little complication that had happened while we were at the reclamation village. It was stupid to unnecessarily damage relations, so I had told Miyoshi not to worry about it when he came to apologize. Still, I didn’t have any obligation to trust them enough to let it go without preparing for the future.

“But...”

“Just take it, Katou,” Lily said, cutting her off. “Just like you said, he’s a worrywart, right?”

“Not really... I’m just being careful,” I complained.

Lily hugged me from behind and poked my cheek as I grimaced. She giggled, totally seeing through my attempt to hide my embarrassment with my displeasure.



Our journey went on. We passed by reclamation villages, asked about their circumstances, and sometimes stopped for rest as we pushed on north. Before long, we arrived at a large prairie.

We were now near the center of Lorenz County. This region was used for pastures, so we saw cows chewing away at grass and cattlemen leading them around. They worked in large groups and were wearing armor beneath their sturdy-looking greatcoats. They were even armed with all manner of weapons. No matter how I looked at them, they appeared more like brawny mercenaries.

Here in this world rampant with monsters, the cattlemen of the southern Empire were apparently quite famous as an armed group. They weren’t affiliated with any agricultural communities or settlements. They lived out in the dangerous prairies and were viewed with contempt in an entirely different way from elves. This made sense. Even from my eyes, they looked like they were living in their own world.

Those who spent their entire lives in the villages they were born in thought this way of life was eerie. It wasn’t a matter of good or bad; they simply found it strange. In a sense, the cattlemen’s position wasn’t all that different from visitors. Unconditional respect was no different from a form of prejudice, after all.



One day, we saw an uncountable school of fish. I doubted my eyes at first. The fish were moving over land. They were obviously monsters. They were called tripdrills and resembled small colorful marlins. They formed schools and used their pectoral fins to fly through the sky as if they were in the sea. The sight was like a work of art.

“So those are migratory monsters...” I muttered.

“Yes. Tripdrills are particularly famous for moving in huge groups between the largest Dark Woods in the northern continent and the Fringes,” Kei said as she peeked out of the carriage. “The entire school takes a particular route, so villages and cities are built in a way to avoid their path. They’re basically safe so long as we avoid their migrations.”

“Basically?”

“Every year, packs of tripdrills break off from the school and cause a large number of casualties. The actual problem is that monsters who prey upon tripdrills take the same route north and scatter to hunt the stragglers.”

With such massive numbers, it was fairly common for smaller schools to break off. Much stronger monsters came out of the Woodlands in significant force every year to prey on these smaller groups.

“Incidentally, a single tripdrill is considered weak, even in the Fringes. The schools aren’t out of control either, so they aren’t treated as a disaster.”

“With that many...?”

Even grade 5 magic would only blow away a small portion of the school. We couldn’t do anything about them. It would be over if we got caught in the flow, so we waited for the tripdrills to pass by.

Three days later, we arrived at our destination: the trade city Serrata.

Chapter 11: The Boy Who Seeks Strength ~Kaneki Mikihiko's POV~

“Commander, you’re looking pretty pale. You feeling okay?”

After we exited the building of a certain trade company in the suburbs outside Serrata, I took a peek at the commander’s face as she walked next to me.

“Are you getting enough sleep? Oh, I know. If you’re having trouble sleeping, then I can keep you company at night.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m not so weak that I’ll collapse from this much,” she replied in exasperation. “Besides, if need be, I can use sleeping magic on myself. I can actually cast several grade 2 magics, despite appearances.”

“Isn’t it pretty bad to use sleeping magic too often? The Mikihiko body pillow is way healthier. On lonely nights, it even comes with a chat function.”

“It’s healthy, but it’s not wholesome, is it now? There are too many unnecessary functions. Try selling it after you get rid of all your ulterior motives.”

“Okay, so how ’bout a shoulder massage? No dirty intentions included.”

“The way you made sure to mention that makes me trust you less. Rejected.”

“Tch. Your guard is way too tough, Commander.”

I was actually secretly relieved to see her acting peevish. She seemed exasperated, but there was a slight smile on her lips. I knew she was a woman of strong mind and body, but ever since the attack on Fort Tilia, she’d been constantly on edge. She looked like she could collapse at any moment. If talking to me relaxed her a bit, then I would play the fool for her as much as she wanted.

We boarded the manamobile parked outside the building. There were several knights on standby within. The commander signaled the driver, and the manamobile slowly began moving.

“In any case,” I said to her, “good thing we just happened to find one, huh?”

“Yes, a good thing indeed.”

We had arrived a little early, but the commander’s plan was to visit Count Lorenz in Serrata. Unlike the villages we had been staying in up until now, the Empire’s great city of Serrata had a population of

over ten thousand people, so they had enough room to temporarily house the hundreds of survivors from Fort Tilia. The commander was going to discuss how to handle the surviving imperial soldiers with the count and give her report of Fort Tilia's fall to the Imperial Army's upper brass. She estimated this would take at least three days, at most a full week.

In the meantime, all of the visitors from afar, including Takahiro, were going to stay at a travelers' rest stop in the suburbs outside the city. However, seeing how several of Takahiro's servants couldn't hide their identities as monsters, it would be difficult for them to relax at a regular inn. That was why the commander had gone through a trade company that had strong ties to the Alliance Knights to rent a vacant house. This was the reason for our visit just now.

"Takahiro rendered the most distinguished service during the defense of Fort Tilia. Furthermore, we have been in his debt during the entire journey here. I have no idea how many casualties we would've suffered had he not been with us. I don't believe this is enough to repay him. It's a matter of honor that we accommodate him as best we can."

"Seriously. Lily's super strong, huh?"

"Did you hear, Commander?" one of the knights chimed in. He was one of the veterans, which emphasized how capable he was. Personnel for the knights had a high turnover rate due to injury or death. "Word is that, among the soldiers, some admire Lily in a way unbecoming of their age."

"Hmm."

"Not that I find it all that unbelievable. Even if she's a monster, she's unbelievably attractive, and she's so gallant in combat. She also saved quite a few soldiers with her healing magic. Plus, she's got huge knockers. Honestly, I'm jealous."

"Don't be so vulgar," the commander warned him with a grimace.

I was indebted to this old veteran in all sorts of ways. He was great at looking after others and was good-natured. His only flaws were his tendency to grumble and his dirty language...

"Don't say that in front of Takahiro," I added. "Otherwise, don't complain if he beats you up for it."

"Ha ha. Those two are so intimate, huh? I'd be so dead."

"Seriously, be careful, okay?"

Takahiro was so serious and patient by nature that I often wondered why he was friends with someone as flippant as me. At the same time, he was the type who was very scary when angry. We ended up in this strange world, but he was still my precious friend, just as he was before.

All of the knights I knew I only met because of coming here. They

were my comrades, and they all idolized the commander. I didn't like the idea of their relationship with my friend getting weird, so I made sure to emphasize my point.

"I'm not kidding. Be careful, okay? He may not look it, but he's pretty strong."

"Huh? That so?" He looked surprised, but after thinking it over, he understood. "Oh, I get it. Now that you mention it, he protected key points of the fortress during the siege completely independent of the commander's group, didn't he?"

All of the knights here, including this veteran, had been fighting in separate places at the time. In fact, the knights who had fought with the commander back then were instructed to remain closer to Takahiro now. This was because they were more likely to see Takahiro in a favorable light since they'd overcome that battle by his side.

"During the battle with Juumonji Tatsuya, I heard Takahiro was giving out orders to his servants in a joint struggle with the lieutenant. So you mean to say he also fought back then? Is he stronger than you?"

"Well, yeah." We'd had a few mock battles up until now, but even with my prized Aerial Knight, I didn't win a single bout despite the fact that Takahiro didn't use Asarina. "I'm not even a match for him."

"Hmmm. That good, huh?" he said as he leaned forward.

This man really did have a great interest in such topics, befitting the long years he had spent risking his life in battle. The other knights were also drawn in by our conversation.

"It's pretty pathetic. I'm not even close to beating him."

"It's okay," one of the other knights said. "You have talent, sir. You'll catch up soon."

"I wonder about that..."

There was a bit of a sour taste in my mouth. Realizing this, I figured out that I had messed up. Just as expected, the knights were looking at me curiously. I waved them off, telling them it was nothing, and forced myself to act normal as I changed the topic.



"Okay, I'm off. I'll be back in a jiffy. I'm sure it'll be lonely, but please wait for me."

"There's no need to hurry. It'll take me time to pass out orders here, anyway."

"Um...Commander? My feelings get hurt when you so plainly ignore that part about being lonely, you know?"

After that heartwarming exchange, I descended from the vehicle. From there, I headed toward a slightly open hill a short distance away from town. The survivors from Fort Tilia had pitched camp there.

They had just started building defenses in case of a monster attack and were running about quite busily. Having finally reached Serrata, they felt release and relief from their arduous journey. It showed in their cheerful expressions.

I walked over to the edge of the encampment. There, a manamobile was parked next to the forest occupying half the hill. After exchanging greetings with the knights who were on guard a small distance away, I called out to the people inside the vehicle.

“It’s Mikihiko. Anyone home?”

“Mikihiko? By all means, come in.”

With Rose’s permission, I lifted the cloth to enter the manamobile.

“Oh, wait. Don’t come in yet,” Katou said in a panic.

But it was far too late. I had already stepped inside.

“Hwuh?”

I was greeted with a breast.

It was a happy and embarrassing surprise...except it wasn’t at all. It was a good thing it wasn’t too; Takahiro would’ve killed me. But though I hadn’t walked in on any of the girls naked, there was in fact a breast on the ground.

Yup, I’ve got no idea what’s going on.

“Am I getting enough sleep...?”

I rubbed my eyes, but it was no hallucination. That was obvious. I did have an extraordinary interest in the commander’s chest, but still, I wasn’t so abnormally starved that I would see such a hallucination. There was actually a breast on the floor of the manamobile. A huge one at that. Lily’s were splendid enough that one could tell through her clothes, but this seemed even larger.

However, on closer inspection, it was somewhat warped. Frankly, it wasn’t really sexy. How could I even describe it? It was as if a grade-schooler who was obsessed with sex but never actually saw the real thing had tried to create a three-dimensional drawing driven entirely by libido... Something half-baked like that. Not that this analogy really made any sense.

It looked like a breast at a glance, but the texture of the material was clearly off. Furthermore, breasts usually came in pairs, but there was only one here. I was still totally confused as Katou retrieved the mystery object in a fluster.

“Um, is that your breast?” I asked on reflex.

What the hell are you asking, you dumbass?

“I-It’s not.”

Katou obviously denied it. Her voice trembled ever so slightly as she immediately moved over to Rose. She then nestled up against the puppet, who was fairly tall for a woman, and looked my way, half hiding behind her.

If one didn't know the circumstances, they might consider her behavior rude, but this was just how I talked with Katou. I didn't mind it. Considering how she'd seemed liable to collapse at any moment when we first spoke, this was actually a major victory for her. I could really feel how earnestly she loved Takahiro and Rose.

"Oh, I forgot to clean up. I'm glad my master didn't see that," Rose said as she took the mock-breast from Katou and shoved it into a bag.

"Hey, Rose. What was that?" I asked.

She turned her masked face toward me. "If you're going to create a human-like body, the breasts are important. That's what Mana told me."

"Huh? Well, you've got a point there. They're super important, I guess?"

"I tried creating a woman's breast with hopes to adapt it for my own body in the future. It was nothing more than a prototype, meant to be discarded before making my own chest, but it came out rather poorly. Mana said the bigger the better, but creating a part of the human body based entirely on my imagination turned out to be rather difficult."

"Yeah, I bet. I don't think Takahiro's really got a thing for big tits or anything, though."

"Is that so? Then Mikihiko, what manner of breasts do you think my master will like?"

Huh? You're asking me? I stared back at her, but Rose was seriously waiting for an answer. She was levelheaded by nature, yet she could still be airheaded. How did I get stuck talking about my friend's sexual preferences to a girl, anyway? Katou's eyes were telling me not to say anything strange. She didn't look like she could handle any more of this conversation. Not that I could either. My only choice was to settle it as safely as possible.

"Uhhh... Let's see... Isn't it better to go with whatever *you* think is best? I mean, it's like giving a gift you think would be most suitable for yourself."

That wasn't quite the same thing, but Rose was evidently convinced.

"I see. What I think is best, you say?" The eyes beneath her mask shifted to Katou for confirmation.

"He has a point," Katou added. "If you make what you think is cutest, it might actually be the best choice. Besides, it looks like there's a limit to what you can do based purely on imagination. It'll be better to investigate it some more before making anything."

Rose turned back to me before Katou even noticed the strange gaze she had directed at her.

“Thank you very much, Mikihiko. This has been useful.”

She bowed her head courteously. I didn't really get it, but it looked like things were settled. I felt like there still might be some trouble despite the safe conclusion, but that was probably just my imagination. What happened next had nothing to do with me.

“By the way, why are you here, Mikihiko?” Rose asked with a cock of her head.

“Oh, right. I don't see Takahiro anywhere. Do you know where he is?”

“My master has gone out for a bit with Lily and Gerbera.”

“I see. Okay then, I'll go take a look around.”

I thanked Rose, then left the manamobile behind.



I found Takahiro within the forest behind the manamobile. They were out of view because Gerbera was with them. I could guess what they were up to. I raised my hand as Lily turned toward the sound of my footsteps, then entered the small clearing in the forest. If one didn't know the circumstances, the scene before me would have looked like a monster killing a boy.

“Shyaaah!”

The Great White Spider was on the attack. The mere presence she gave off was pure power. It struck my skin and froze my entire body. I had expected this, but I felt like I was on the verge of screaming pitifully, so I bit down on my lip. I genuinely thought they were amazing. Both Gerbera...and the guy facing off against her.

“Oooh!”

Takahiro let out a roar and stood his ground without any hesitation in his movements. He repelled an incoming leg with his sword, warded off another with his shield, and then jumped from the spot to evade the next.

Though she was holding back, Gerbera's attacks had plenty of force behind them. A glancing blow sent him toppling over. A finishing blow came next as a spider leg came crashing down. Takahiro just barely managed to roll out of the way. He immediately got back to his feet, but he was met with a merciless chain of attacks. Takahiro handled this well, but one of the blows still struck his upper arm.

Gerbera's talons were folded, but that was pretty much the same as being struck with a hammer. Takahiro let out a stifled shriek as he lost his grip on his sword. It tumbled to the ground. Nevertheless, he didn't let the pain dull his judgment. Takahiro caught the next strike with his shield and used the impact to jump back to get some space. He lowered his waist, preparing for the next attack even as his right

arm dangled about loosely.

“That’s enough! Master! That’s enough!” Lily yelled, clapping her hands together.

Takahiro and Gerbera both dispelled their fighting spirit. Lily deployed a healing glyph as she immediately ran over to his side.

“Aah...dammit. How pathetic. I somehow missed that last one,” Takahiro grumbled.

“You’re getting tired, after all,” Gerbera said. “Still, that was an impressive performance for not having Asarina’s help. Besides, I found your reaction at the end rather impressive, just so you know.”

“More importantly,” Lily cut in, “are you okay, Master? That last one hit you pretty good.”

“It’s nothing serious. It isn’t broken, I think,” Takahiro replied. “Oh, huh. You’re here too, Mikihiko?”

The white light from the healing magic illuminated Takahiro’s face, highlighting his rather pale complexion. Even if the last strike didn’t break any bones, it definitely cracked some.

“Did you need something from me?” Takahiro asked.

“Yup. I’ve got a message from the commander.”

I started walking toward Takahiro when I noticed the sword he had dropped. I reached down to pick it up...and saw my palm covered in sweat.

“What’s up?” Takahiro asked.

“I-It’s nothing.”

I quickly wiped my hand against my clothes and picked up the sword, then ran over to him.



After I informed Takahiro of the house we had managed to acquire in the suburbs and checked in with the knight who was to guide them, I returned to the commander’s side. She asked me about the progress of the encampment and informed me of the orders she’d given while I was gone. Then we got into a manamobile and headed to Serrata. The city was about half a day’s ride away.

“Commander, you’re looking a little pale. How ’bout taking a nap until we reach Serrata?” I suggested in a slightly stronger tone than last time.

She was pretty much white as a sheet now. No matter how I looked at it, she was pushing herself too much.

“There’s still much I have to think about before speaking with the count.”

“In that case, how ’bout I at least give you a shoulder massage? *With dirty intentions.*”

“‘With dirty intentions’ is clearly out of the question.”

“Yup. So if you don’t want that massage, then please get some sleep. If you go in that state, you might not even be able to have a proper conversation to begin with.”

She thought it over for a bit, then nodded. “Then, just for a short while.”

The commander folded her arms, leaned back in her seat, and closed her eyes. I let out a sigh of relief. I gave her a glance as she sat next to me. She was taller than me, and her body was muscular. She truly had the body of a hardened knight...but there was still a limit to such hardiness. There was much to do and not enough hands to do it. In this world, it was impossible to command people into action without a certain level of status. With the upper brass of Fort Tilia annihilated, the commander was the only one among the survivors who could give out orders.

Naturally, she ended up concentrating on her job. She had brought together the devastated forces of the army and ran about dealing with everything that had to be done to evacuate Fort Tilia. When that was over, she’d moved a large group of noncombatants and injured soldiers through the dangerous Woodlands. Without Shiran at the front and Takahiro to the rear, she probably would have collapsed on the way here.

It was honestly really frustrating. Unlike those two, I couldn’t protect her in any way other than using my status as a savior.

Can I become strong like him? I kept thinking to myself. Fortunately, I supposedly had a talent for fighting. I never would have noticed it back in our world, but when I held a sword or spear, I had mysteriously good instincts. It was different from a visitor’s inherent ability, though. It was more like all the gears within me were engaging just right. In fact, Gerbera had told me the same thing.

“From what I’ve seen, you seem to have more talent for fighting.”

This matter involved her precious lord. She definitely wasn’t lying. I could tell I was closing in on Takahiro’s sword skills at a significant pace, but I didn’t know how much meaning there was behind that.

I recalled Takahiro’s training earlier. He’d gone in under the assumption that he would spill his own blood. Broken bones were well within permissible limits. If someone were to undergo such severe training in our world, it would actually hinder growth. It was only possible here because of healing magic.

Takahiro was pushing himself as far as he could. He was sure to get stronger. Even as he was now, he was already stronger than myself and all those around me. A small difference in natural talent didn’t mean anything. In that case, if I also...

“Don’t get any strange ideas, Mikihiko.” Before I knew it, the

commander had opened her eyes slightly. "I believe I know exactly what you're thinking of."

"What do you mean...?"

"Don't play dumb. For a while now, after you go see Takahiro, you sometimes look as if you're brooding over something. I can at least guess what you're thinking about. So let me tell you now. Forget about it." Despite her cold glare, her voice came out more as a concerned warning. "Just once, I also witnessed Takahiro's training."

"You too? He can train like that because this world has healing magic, right?"

"Yes, you're right. Still, even if it's possible, nobody does it that way. Nobody would normally think of it, and even if they did, they wouldn't actually give it a try. If they did try it anyway, they couldn't be half-hearted about it. That is to say nothing of doing it on a continuous basis... It just isn't possible without a master of high-grade healing magic like Lily nearby. Even among the knights... Well, not even they would do it."

The reason she was kind of going in circles was likely because of what Shiran had done in the past to get stronger. I'd heard about it before when one of the knights had gotten drunk and a little talkative.

"Commander..."

"I've said a little too much. I'm going back to sleep."

She closed her eyes once more. This time she really did fall asleep. I could hear her breathing right away. Her sturdy body leaned against mine.



My heart burned from the weight of that which was dear to me. As I was now, however, this was the only way I could support her...

“I’m going to get stronger too, Commander.”

In my own way, without losing to him. So that one day, I can at least support you.

I hardened my resolve as the manamobile drove on. At this time, I still didn’t know what fate awaited me.

Chapter 12: Tranquil Times in the Suburbs

After we parted ways with the survivors of Fort Tilia, who'd accompanied us all this way, we dropped by a travelers' rest stop in the suburbs outside Serrata. We were staying in a rented house that the commander had prepared for us through one of the Alliance Knights' purveyors.

I got some lessons from Shiran, then washed off my sweat and returned to my room. Satisfaction and a pleasant sense of fatigue washed over me. Ever since Shiran began teaching me swordsmanship, I was starting to get a real sense of improvement with a blade. It differed greatly from simply acclimating to the act of battle. Spurred on by Mikihiko's striking growth, which far surpassed mine in pace, I not only felt fulfilled from training, but genuinely happy.

"My Lord, look. Isn't this amusing?"

As I wiped off my wet hair with a towel, Gerbera cheerfully came over to me.

"What is it?"

"I got it from Rose," Gerbera said, holding a black stick about twenty centimeters long in her hand. "Hyup!"

She swung the stick with a playful shout, and a thinner pipe jumped out from the end. The pipe fixed itself in place with friction and remained fully extended. It was an expandable baton.

"Oh, yeah. I heard she made something like this."

This was one of Katou's suggestions. She didn't know much about it herself, so the knowledge of its inner workings came from Mikihiko. Rose was in the middle of a trial-and-error period for many different things. As a part of that, she was actively putting new knowledge and concepts into practice. She was keeping in mind any applications for future use, but for the time being, she made things without considering whether they were useful to us. Most of these ended up becoming toys for Gerbera and Kei. Those two found small gimmicks to be quite the mystery, much like how any item related to magic pulled at my heartstrings.

"Also! Look at this! I even got this little thing!"

Gerbera took out a wooden doll about the size of her palm. It was a 10-centimeter egg with features such as a face, hair, clothes, and hands carved into its surface. It appeared to be a caricature of Lily.

“How cute,” I said.

“Mhm. But that’s not all. Look, it opens up here.”

The doll split in two at the stomach with a pop. The insides of both pieces were hollow, revealing a smaller Lily within.

“A matryoshka doll?”

What’s Mikihiko been teaching Rose...? I found it a little questionable, but seeing Gerbera enjoy herself so much, I decided it was a good thing. Gerbera popped open the smaller Lily and pulled out a small fox doll from within. This one was Ayame.

“He he he. Cute, is it not?”

Judging by her appearance, Gerbera was the same age as me, if not a little older. Normally, I would question how she enjoyed this stuff just as much as Kei, but...

“Be careful not to break it...”

Seeing the childish sparkle in her blood-red eyes made me happy. It was a little different from watching Kei in high spirits, but it was charming all the same. That wasn’t all, though. I felt like I could gaze at this smile forever.

A grin naturally came to my lips as I took a look around the room. Aside from Gerbera, Lily and Shiran were also present. Rose, Katou, and Kei were in the room next door. I heard they had managed to buy some dyes here the other day using the knights as an intermediary. They had told me they were making clothes. I wasn’t informed of the details, though.

I could faintly hear their cheerful voices through the thin walls. It drove home how tranquil this period was. I wondered if this would become an everyday event once we reached the commander’s home of Aker. Just imagining it sent excitement running through my heart. I could picture a happy future for all of us.



There were three knights staying with us in this house, including Shiran. The rest of them were split between guarding the other students and being on standby with the army’s soldiers in the encampment.

As for the commander, after she’d helped us get this house, she had taken a few knights with her to Serrata. Mikihiko was also accompanying her. They’d left two days ago. She had to deal with all sorts of procedures and negotiations, such as transferring the soldiers, so at a minimum, I heard it was going to take three days. The plan was to immediately depart for Aker once she was done. Now was the time for us to restore our spirits.

“Aah, rats. Another failure...”

Lily raised her voice just around the time Gerbera left for the next

room at Katou's request. I had been in the middle of talking to Shiran about the contents of today's training and the guidance she was to provide my servants in the future. Lily, who was sitting on the bed, threw up both her hands and fell backward.

To be more precise, she'd thrown up both her arms. They currently ended with stumps at the wrist. She wasn't injured. She'd just been trying to maintain her form as a human girl while also mimicking an entirely different creature with just her hands. This second mimicry had come undone. Lately, Lily had been putting all of her efforts into trying to actualize partial mimicry. It wasn't going her way, though.

Slime bubbled out of her two stumps and took the shape of human hands. Lily remained laying face up, looking at the ceiling with a sullen expression.

"Don't push yourself too hard," I said, taking a seat on the bed next to her and poking the crease between her eyebrows.

"Owie. Geez... Master?"

"How about taking a break already?"

"Shall I prepare some tea?" Shiran asked as she stood up.

"Oh. In that case, I'll help out," Lily said, popping herself back up.

But Shiran shook her head. "You still don't know how to make it, right? Please take it easy, Lily."

Shiran left the room, smiling pleasantly. Her footsteps went down the staircase. Now that we were alone, Lily cuddled up against me.

"Hmmm, mmmmrgh... Maybe it's useless after all."

Lily often nestled against me, but today, it was more like she was leaning on me. She was completely limp.

"Lily."

I embraced Lily's soft body. She didn't resist at all. She slid her exhausted self down, wriggled about to adjust her position, and placed her head atop my lap.



“Mmmm...”

She sweetly rubbed her cheek against my thigh, much like a cat.

“Hey, Lily,” I said, playing with her bangs.

“Yeah?”

“Are you maybe feeling seriously down about this?”

“Maybe,” she said, rolling her eyes. She gave me a weak smile. “I already knew this... Maybe it’s just my limit as a mimic slime...”

The first time she’d brought up partial mimicry was shortly after we left Fort Tilia, before we reached the first reclamation village. That had been twenty days ago, yet success was nowhere in sight.

Lily let out a small sigh. “Even though I need to succeed at this to bring out my monster abilities to their fullest...”

“I get what you’re trying to say...”

If she could accomplish this, she’d be able to use all of her abilities without any drawbacks. For example, no normal monster could fight the Great White Spider of the Depths in a straight fight. In terms of strength, toughness, speed, recovery, and anything and everything related to combat, Gerbera was in the ultimate class. It would be difficult to compete with her in just one of those fields. Even if it were possible, one would be overwhelmed in every other way.

But what if Lily could mimic individual body parts? Then she could use the best parts of every monster. Maybe she could even push Gerbera back... If it was possible, that is.

“Hey, Lily. There’s no point in feeling depressed over it, is there?” I said, touching her cheek. “Humans can jump into the air, but we can’t fly through the skies. We can use our hands to swim through water, but we can’t descend thousands of meters into the depths. There are things we can and can’t do. You’re a monster, but there’s still a limit, right?”

“But humans *can* fly through the air and dive into the depths.”

Lily sounded like a child making excuses. It brought a wry smile to my face. She always behaved like the big sister among all my servants, so it was strange for her to act so dejected. She was always the one supporting me, so I was happy she was depending on me like this.

“I mean, that’s only by using airplanes and submarines,” I said.

“Mm... That’s true, but you know...”

I stroked her brow to comfort her. Lily shut her eyes. Our time alone quietly flowed on.

After a while, Lily muttered, “But Master?”

“Yeah?”

“Even if they have to rely on machines, it’s still possible to fly in the air and dive into the depths, right?”

For some reason, I felt a chill run down my spine. Maybe it was because I associated the overly calm expression on her face, her eyes shut, with that of a martyred clergyman.

“Lily?”

She slowly opened her eyes, and then...started blinking in surprise.

“Hm? What’s up, Master?”

Lily looked up at me with a curious expression. This was the usual Lily. I lost the words I was about to say and scratched my cheek.

“No... It’s nothing.”

“Weirdo.” Lily giggled, then sat up. “Thanks for pampering me. I kinda feel better now.”

“That so? All right then.”

She was back to her usual self. I was happy to be of service when she was feeling depressed.

“Besides, it’s not decided yet that this is impossible. If it is, I can just think of another way of doing it. Mm. I’ll keep at it a little longer.”

“Don’t exhaust yourself too much, okay?” I warned her as she lightly clenched her fists.

It was good she’d regained her energy, but it would all come to nothing if she just pushed herself too hard again.

After mulling it over, I offered a suggestion. “Oh yeah. How about going out into town for a change of pace?”

“A change of pace?”

“Yeah. It might be a good idea to go out for dinner or something.”

Lily considered it, then gave me a firm nod.



We were currently working with the knights. Because of that, they were directly handling all of our meals and necessities. We didn’t really have a choice in this, considering Rose and Gerbera, but I felt like we couldn’t just leave this be.

In a sense, this was the perfect opportunity for Lily and me to go out and experience how people lived in this world. We needed someone who could use a translation runestone to go with us, though. Shiran had to wait for regular contact from the knights in the encampment, so she couldn’t come with us. Hence, we brought Kei along.

Since we were so close to the trade city Serrata, the hustle and bustle of people in this suburb was much livelier than the villages we had passed through before. I could hear chickens squawking in the distance somewhere. The sound of cheerful employees calling for guests outside the tightly lined shops resounded over the noise of

congestion.

Over half of the people we saw had swords at their waists. They were typically wearing traveling clothes, but some clearly appeared to be locals. Self-defense was necessary so long as the threat of monsters existed, but the sight of people openly carrying around weapons like it was perfectly normal was something I was a little unaccustomed to as a Japanese citizen.

We continued chatting about such things as Kei turned a friendly smile to me. "Once we reach Aker, I'm sure you'll be surprised."

Apparently, it was going to be even more amazing there. I'd heard it had a strong militaristic ethos, so maybe it had something to do with that. As my thoughts drifted over to a country I'd yet to see, I continued walking through the streets and listening to Kei.

While we did so, I felt gazes fall upon us once in a while. Half of them were looking at the elf Kei; the other half were looking at me and Lily. Our facial features as visitors differed from the humans here. Of course we would attract attention. It actually felt like our status as visitors might cause a huge uproar, but fortunately that didn't happen.

There was a bit of a reason for this. Some people in this world had what they called blessed blood. The name was pretty self-explanatory. We called our inherent powers cheats, but here they called them blessings all throughout their history. Blessed blood was a nickname born from this. In short, they were the descendants of visitors.

This world had seen visitors once a century for ages. Several among them had died in battle without leaving behind any children, but plenty had lived a full life. Naturally, their descendants still lived on. There were Asians among the saviors, so because of that, even as we walked through town like this, we were nothing more than a rare sighting.

At any rate, I tried to ignore the gazes and continued my stroll through town. I saw a good number of metal signboards hanging off the buildings. Lily and I guessed what kind of shops they were based on the signs, and Kei informed us whether we were correct. We got about a third of them right. The signs had illustrations to indicate the type of shop, but we couldn't identify some of the more radical symbols, and sometimes Kei couldn't even explain why such signs identified their shops. I made sure not to waste this opportunity and memorized any necessary information.

We ended up getting lunch at a random shop. I used the money the commander had given me as recompense for guard duty to buy some flatbread and salted roast meat. This was also a learning experience. I already knew the different types of currencies and their use, but it took actually spending some to get accustomed to it. It was also important to get a sense for how much money we needed to buy

bread.

We carried our food over to a plaza in town. We went off to the outer edges, where we wouldn't get in the way of traffic, and had our meal. From there, we had a view of Serrata, where the commander was supposed to be now.

The Woodlands invaded Lorenz County from the south, and the Dark Woods blocked it off from the north. To the west lay the granary regions of Longue County. The east bordered the country of Viscum, one of the Three Eastern Kingdoms. The main road between Longue County and Viscum ran through Serrata, and with the Margraviate of Maclaurin close to the north, this was one of the main distribution hubs for goods in the southern Empire. That was why Serrata was referred to as the trade city.

However, the exterior appearance of the city ran counter to its name. Imposing walls furnished with defensive towers ran the entire perimeter of the city. It was a fortified city, so to speak. Serrata's position was elevated, and it was surrounded by two circular layers of walls. It gave a glimpse of the city's growth and expansion.

This type of scenery was apparently fairly common in this world. They could use earth magic for construction here. What's more, due to the threat of monsters, civil engineering was a focus of technological advancement. The defensive walls of reclamation villages were impressive, but they looked meager compared to Serrata's.

Barring a few exceptions, the major cities of this world were built around such fortresses that had already served their purpose. Considering they needed to always be prepared for a monster attack, it was perfectly natural that cities would take on such a form.

Fort Serrata was currently occupied by the feudal lord of the lands, House Lorenz. Their troops and a portion of the Southern Imperial Army were garrisoned within. The commander chose to visit the nearest city first because Fort Tilia had lost its means of long-distance communication. Fort Serrata was the same kind of fortress as Fort Tilia and had the same equipment available for use.

After finishing my meal, I gazed at the majesty of Fort Serrata and waited for Kei to finish eating.

"Hey, Master?" Lily said all of a sudden. I found this strange. There was a slight hint of tension in her voice. "Isn't it kinda noisy over that way?"

She looked over to a narrow alleyway that led to this plaza. I couldn't hear anything, but I didn't think Lily was just imagining things. Her sensory organs were much sharper than those of a human.

"That's... No, but why...?"

Her expression was getting grimmer by the second. It was clear that something was happening. I unconsciously checked the shield on

my back and the sword at my waist. If there was even the slightest hint of danger, we had to be able to run away at any moment. That was what immediately came to mind, but Lily's next words made me withdraw such thoughts immediately.

"I think...one of the Alliance Knights is being chased by a large group of people."

"What?"

"Ch-Chased?! What do you mean?!" Kei yelled, dropping her half-eaten bread in shock.

"I don't know... What should we do, Master?" Lily asked after shaking her head.

Honestly, this was far too sudden. I had no idea what was going on, but I didn't have the time to sit here and think about it.

"We can't just leave him be. Besides, it could be dangerous for us if we ignore the situation."

We owed a debt to the Alliance Knights. Moreover, I was staying in this town with Rose and Gerbera. If there was some sort of emergency with the Alliance Knights, it could put them in danger.

"Kei, you stay h—"

"I'm going too!" Kei cut me off.

I hesitated for a moment, considering whether I should try and convince her otherwise, but there was nobody nearby to leave her with, so it was better to keep her within reach.

"Okay. Lily, take us there."

Lily gave me a nod and took the lead as we ran off toward the commotion.

Chapter 13: Notice of a Sudden Change

We ran single file down the narrow alleyway. The people we passed looked like they were wondering why we were in such a rush. The alleyway became less and less populated as we went. The desolate atmosphere was likely because the fleeing knight Lily had mentioned was trying to avoid the eyes of the public. Several minutes later, I started to hear the tumult myself.

“Seize him!” someone yelled.

We turned the corner and found what appeared to be a group of a dozen soldiers thrusting their spears at a single man. He wasn’t wearing any armor, but I recognized his face. He was definitely one of the Alliance Knights.

His movements were stiff, perhaps due to an injury. That was why the soldiers here had managed to catch up with him. Several soldiers were groaning and laying on the ground of this slightly wider alleyway. If this knight had defeated a few soldiers despite this vast difference in numbers, his skills were rather impressive. Still, such resistance only served to provoke their wrath.

“You son of a...!”

One of the soldiers lunged at the knight with his spear. Their orders had been to seize the knight, but with such fierce resistance, one of them had lost himself to rage and ran wild. In a sense, it was almost like an accident. The knight desperately twisted his body, but the sharp spearpoint ruthlessly plunged into his muscles. He fell backward, seriously wounded.

Kei gasped. I also felt blood rushing to my head as I watched someone I knew being attacked. At the same time, I knew I had to maintain my composure. We were faced with twelve trained soldiers. The knight was seriously wounded. His injury required immediate attention. He already was too weak to resist anymore, but the momentum of events couldn’t be stopped now that they were in motion.

The soldiers lunged forward with their spears like a surging wave. There was no time to call them to a stop. If I was to intervene, I had to start by forcefully halting their attack while sheltering and treating the knight, protecting Kei to my rear, and rendering all of these soldiers powerless. Coming to that conclusion, I yelled out my orders.

“Covering fire! Then treat and guard him!”

The soldiers noticed us when I shouted. They looked our way—and were immediately assaulted by wind. It was Lily’s grade 2 wind magic. We didn’t know the situation, so I had her hold back from killing them. This was, at most, covering fire. It was merely to distract them.

I was jogging their way, but I kicked it into high gear, leaving Kei behind. I’d already strengthened my body with mana. Despite running as fast as I could, Lily was ahead of me. She ran to the fallen knight, picked him up, and leaped back. I passed by her and took to the fore. Lily could treat the knight’s fatal wound. She was the only one capable of healing and guarding him while also protecting Kei.

Naturally, this meant the job of dealing with the twelve soldiers fell squarely in my lap. I met the knight’s eyes as Lily retreated past me, still carrying him. He looked like he couldn’t believe it. If he could speak, he would probably tell me to stop. I couldn’t deny the implication behind his gaze. I was weak. That was the truth. It would be much more appropriate to leave this role to Lily.

However, I was the only one who could do this. I *had* to. Besides, that knight was operating under one big misunderstanding. Majima Takahiro was certainly weak. I knew that better than anyone. I trained hard every day so that I wouldn’t be a hindrance to Gerbera, Lily, and Rose. I wanted to at least gain enough strength to be able to protect myself.

I didn’t want to remain a burden. I had always worried about this. Currently, that was all I was to those girls. However, my lack of strength was a relative matter. So how weak was Majima Takahiro exactly? That was what the knight misunderstood.

“Ooooooh!”

I threw myself into the middle of the soldiers who’d yet to regain their footing from Lily’s wind magic, then slammed my sheathed sword into the ribs of the soldier in front of me. I felt the unpleasant sensation of his bones cracking through my palm. I shook away that feeling and pulled back my sword, immediately thrusting it into the stomach of the soldier next to him.

Seeing his two colleagues pass out from the pain, another soldier put himself on guard against me. I slipped past his defenses and slammed my sheath into his jaw. I saw one of the soldiers who had fallen over from Lily’s magic trying to get back up and gave him a good kick to the gut. That was four down. With them out of the picture, I lunged forth once more.

I was nothing but a hindrance to my servants. I was greatly inferior to both Lily and Rose, and there was no need to even mention Gerbera. However, those girls were monsters from one of the most

dangerous regions in the world, the Depths of the Woodlands. Not only that, they were all superior specimens: a high monster, a unique monster, and a rare monster. With the exceptions of cheaters, and knights like Shiran, pretty much all of humanity were weaker than them.

I'd once defeated a wounded firefang, a monster from the Depths, with the assistance of Asarina and Ayame. Our journey had gone on for a month since then. All the while, I'd continued my harsh training with Gerbera and taken lessons in swordsmanship from Shiran. In contrast, the soldiers of this world—even if the ones here were actually as strong as the ones at Fort Tilia—could only fight the monsters of the Fringes when in formation. Even without Asarina or Ayame's help, I was stronger than them in a one-on-one fight.

There was something I couldn't forget here, however. The army's soldiers were strong when fighting in formation. It would be difficult for me to take on more than ten of them at once in a head-on confrontation. That was why I had ordered Lily to fire her magic first. On the way here, I had observed the way Fort Tilia's imperial soldiers fought, and I'd learned that coordination was their greatest weapon. So, I started by taking that away from them.

Having said that, I didn't have time to waste. I had the advantage only because of Lily's preemptive attack. I had to finish things quickly before they could form back up. I couldn't hold back.

“Gaargh?!”

I brought one more soldier to the ground and bashed another with my shield. Even though I'd been taking lessons in swordsmanship from Shiran, my practical training with Gerbera had fostered my fighting style. Even though I was armed with a sword in my right hand and a shield in my left, much like the knights, the way we fought was different. Knights focused on firmly planting themselves in a strong defensive position, using a large shield and heavy armor. I focused on mobility, relying heavily on my ability to evade danger, a sense drilled into my flesh and bones through my training. I also had no fixation on using my sword exclusively.

“Haaaah!”

I carried my momentum from the bash and pushed the soldier down. I strengthened my body as much as I could and toppled the soldier behind him. It was wantonly crude, but that didn't matter so long as it worked. I finished off the soldier with a stomp, breaking his leg, then turned around and charged at another group.

I noticed that two soldiers had regained themselves and were closing in on me. They were unable to shake off their agitation and desperately lunged in with their spears. By that time, however, I was already prepared. I used my enhanced athleticism to leap over the

lunging soldiers and land behind them.

I turned around while swinging my sheathed sword horizontally, breaking one soldier's femur and sending him to the ground screaming. The other soldier turned around, but I was too close. He couldn't wield his sword or spear properly at this distance. The soldier acted indecisive for an instant, in which time I thrust my elbow into his throat.

Three left. Given all that time, the remaining soldiers naturally reformed and were ready for battle.

"F-Fuck! What's with this guy?! He's like a beast!"

"Don't falter! He's coming this way! Stay on guard!"

Their plan was to lay in wait and intercept me. It was going to be a little rough, but I didn't have a choice. I charged in. The three soldiers in front of me lined up and readied their guard—when the one at the end of the line suddenly screamed as he bent over and fell to the ground. Something had flown into his stomach.

The remaining two were agitated now. They had no idea what just happened. Lily had thrown a stone about the size of a fist. She was treating the knight with healing magic while keeping an eye on how she could support me. I was grateful for this as I closed in on the shaken soldiers.

"You bastard!"

The remaining two soldiers cursed me as they thrust their spears. Their attacks were perfectly synchronized, but two people couldn't form a proper spear wall. I could deal with this easily. I parried one spear and grabbed the other by the grip.

"No way?!" one of them shouted.

He seemed to have a fair amount of confidence in his spearmanship. Unfortunately for him, he was poorly matched in this fight. Facing off against spears was actually my specialty. I mean, my normal sparring partner being who she was...no spear could match a single thrust from any of the Great White Spider's legs.

I strengthened my grip and pulled on his spear. My body was constantly strengthened by mana. My arm was several times stronger than normal.

"H-Hwah?!" the soldier yelped as he was thrown off balance.

I drove my knee into his stomach. And after I knocked down the last remaining soldier, the area was entirely suppressed.



"Kei, you can use sleeping magic, right?" I asked. "I don't mind if it's just for a bit, but could you put these soldiers out of commission?"

"O-Of course."

After directing Kei, I walked up to the knight. He looked like he

had no idea what just happened.

“Lily, how’s his injury?”

“He’s okay now. The worst has passed.”

“I see. That’s a relief,” I said with a sigh.

“U-Um, thank you for your assistance, sir... So it’s true you’re quite strong, huh?” the knight said.

“I only managed because of Lily’s support.”

I somehow got through this because I had jumped in while they were all confused. I still had a long way to go. Lily could’ve taken on a measly ten soldiers and rendered them powerless all on her own regardless of their readiness. Furthermore, she could’ve done it without inflicting any serious wounds. In that sense, she was far more suitable for the role I had taken. But because the knight’s injury was too serious, we had no choice but to do what we had done.

I could somewhat fight now, but there was still a large gap between us in terms of combat potential. I wanted to at least get strong enough so that I wouldn’t die on the spot when a cheater attacked, but the path was going to be a long one.

“More importantly, what exactly is going on?” I asked, kneeling down by the still-dazed knight. “Why were these soldiers attacking you?”

“O-Oh, right. I need to inform you of the situation.” He had just barely escaped death. His mind was still stunned. He blinked a few times as if to wake himself up, then desperately began explaining the situation. “Things have gotten rather serious. Armed forces came down from Fort Serrata and are arresting the knights outside the town!”

“What?”

Now it was my turn to be dazed.

“I was just on my way to make a regular report, so I managed to escape,” the knight continued. “Anyway, I needed to inform you of this, so I discarded my armor to avoid detection, but I messed up along the way. I couldn’t just kill imperial soldiers without a good reason to either... Well, maybe I could’ve done something against them one-on-one in a fair fight, but they mercilessly loosed arrows at me, reducing me to this state.”

Things had gotten out of hand. Even with the strength of the Alliance Knights, we couldn’t take on all the military might of such an enormous fortress with just fifty or so people. It was best to assume that all the knights outside of town had already been arrested.

“U-Um, Takahiro,” Kei said, her face pale. Her job was finished, and all the soldiers were fast asleep. “Would it have been better to keep at least one of them awake? We could’ve asked about what’s going on.”

“No, it’s fine. We don’t know how much these grunts even know, and it’s questionable whether they’ll honestly tell us anything. We’re better off using the time to get away from here.”

We didn’t know why Fort Serrata’s armed forces were arresting the knights. For the time being, I wanted to gather information. Moreover, considering that this could grow infinitely worse, it was better for us to reunite with my other servants.

“Actually, are Rose and the others okay...?” I muttered.

“Only a few people outside of the Alliance Knights know about the house. I don’t believe they’ll find it so easily,” Kei said.

“That’s true. You’ve got a point there.”

I nodded back to Kei, but I couldn’t feel at ease until I saw them safe with my own eyes. Thus, we left the sleeping soldiers as they were and headed off.



We ran back to the house while keeping an eye out for pursuers. I was relieved to see everything looked the same as when we’d left. I took a step inside and found someone unexpected waiting for me.

“Takahiro! Thank god! You’re here!”

My friend with ruffled hair, who should’ve been at Fort Serrata, greeted me as I came in. Mikihiko was breathing heavily, perhaps only having just gotten here himself. Behind him, Shiran and some other knights wore grave expressions. I had a bad feeling about this.

“Takahiro. Calm down and listen to me,” Mikihiko said with an extremely stern look. “The commander’s been arrested.”

Chapter 14: To Each Their Own Path

“So? What the hell is going on?”

Hearing the commotion, everyone else gathered together, and we went to the living room to hear the details from Mikihiko. According to him, after he and the commander left the suburbs, they arrived at Fort Serrata in about half a day’s time. They made an appointment with Count Lorenz and were ushered into the fortress.

At that point, Mikihiko was taken to a separate room from the commander. Though he was personally invested in the outcome, he was an unrelated party. There were things they couldn’t say in front of outsiders, so he’d had no choice but to back down. The commander had also agreed to this, so Mikihiko had reluctantly accepted.

However, the commander didn’t return no matter how long he waited. He had tried questioning one of the count’s people, but they had brushed him off with vague replies. Come morning, he had finally managed to get the story out of an attendant. The commander and all of her knights were being kept under house arrest within the fortress. Judging that he couldn’t remain, Mikihiko had cleverly used his status as a savior to escape the stronghold and made his way here while keeping an eye out for pursuers.

“Good job getting all the way here,” I said to him.

“Mm. It was all so sudden. I was super confused, and I was kinda unsure of what to do... But right after we made our appointment, we were sent out to wait a bit in the city. That’s when the commander let me know what to do in case this happened.”

“Wait. She predicted this?”

“I wonder... She kinda laughed it off like it was ridiculous, like it had just popped into her mind on the way...”

Regardless, she had gone out of her way to bring it up and give Mikihiko instructions, which had led him here.

“I mean, I told you about this before, right? All the responsibility for Fort Tilia’s fall might get pinned on her. I wasn’t allowed to see her at all after she was put on house arrest, and I couldn’t get any information out of anyone who knew what was going on, so I can’t say anything for sure... But I don’t think there’s any other reason for them to arrest her.”

“Nothing else comes to mind, huh?”

“But Mikihiko,” Shiran said, “no matter the circumstances, aren’t

Lord Lorenz's actions far too overbearing?" Her expression, half hidden by her eyepatch, was noticeably stiff. "The commander is the princess of Aker. Ours is certainly a small country, and it possesses little national power compared to the Empire, but we aren't so weak-willed that we would accept such behavior. The others of the Five Northern Kingdoms are sure to sympathize with us too. That is to say nothing of Lord Lorenz being responsible for the trade city Serrata, which profits greatly from commerce with the Alliance. I don't believe him to be the type to act so forcefully..."

"What kind of person is Count Lorenz?" I asked Shiran, trying to wrap my head around the situation. She had a good point, but people in power weren't always rational, especially considering the feudal society here.

"I haven't met him personally, but I've heard he has a reputation for being cautious in everything he does," Shiran answered, choosing her words carefully.

"The commander mentioned he's an opportunist who doesn't like to rock the boat," Mikihiko added. "That's why she brushed this off as pretty unlikely."

I furrowed my brows. It was easy to assume they'd misread him, but something didn't feel right. Maybe there was something unbelievable happening out of sight. That bad premonition had my heart astir.

"I can't say anything for sure, but there's one thing on my mind," Mikihiko said, sharpening his gaze from beneath his glasses. "I only found this out while I was gathering information during the commander's confinement. Margrave Maclaurin is apparently in Serrata right now."

"Margrave Maclaurin... You mean the big imperial noble who's famous for hating elves?" I asked, rather perplexed by the unexpected name.

Mikihiko nodded. "Unfortunately, I suppose. It's possible he heard news of Fort Tilia's fall and came out here to take advantage of it."

"Take advantage? Are you suggesting the margrave is the one who ordered the arrest?"

"That's just my guess."

Mikihiko glanced at Shiran to ask for her opinion. She hesitated to reply for a moment but then nodded. "House Maclaurin has been at odds with the Five Northern Kingdoms for generations. Their rocky relationship goes all the way back to the age when the Empire and the Alliance were at war. In fact, House Maclaurin was bestowed the title of margrave specifically to serve as a military force against the Alliance. The two are political enemies to this very day."

The war between the Empire and the Alliance had taken place

several centuries ago. Memories of the conflict were far in the past. However, such historical facts could cast shadows over the relationships between countries far into the future. The difference with which the Empire and the Alliance treated elves was but one gulf that separated them.

“Given the opportunity, he’s sure to happily take advantage of it,” Shiran added. “Actually, I can easily see him gouging the wound open further, calm as can be. Moreover, though it’s strange for me to say so myself, the commander is often ridiculed as an elf lover, so...”

Shiran’s words reinforced Mikihiko’s opinion. Did this explain everything for now? I didn’t know much about Maclaurin’s temperament. Considering Shiran’s position as a former citizen of Aker, it was possible her criticism contained a fair amount of prejudice. But even after factoring that in, there was definitely a gulf between Maclaurin and the Alliance. The commander had miscalculated by missing that a noble who didn’t care about deteriorating relations with Aker was currently staying in Serrata.

“I get the general gist of it,” I said. There were still several points that bothered me, but there was no point in giving them more thought. I decided to put a stop to any further probing for now. “So what’ll happen to the commander?”

The attack on Fort Tilia saw over a thousand people dead among the Southern Imperial Army, the Second Company of the Imperial Knights, and the Third Company of the Alliance Knights. What’s more, an important strategic point for all of humanity had been lost and abandoned. I couldn’t even imagine what would happen to the person being held responsible for that.

“Don’t tell me they’re planning to execu—”

I stopped myself halfway in the middle of saying it. I saw Shiran’s expression warp with sorrow. I shouldn’t have said something so careless.

“No, I’m pretty sure that’s out of the question,” Mikihiko said, thankfully shooting down the possibility. “The Aker royal family is loved by its citizens. Being put on house arrest is one thing, but going as far as executing one of their royals would start a war with Aker. The other nations of the Five Northern Kingdoms wouldn’t stay quiet either, thinking they’d be next. Even for the big boss of the southern Empire, messing up the entire border of the northern Woodlands for such a thing would put him in a miserable position. At worst, the Holy Order might even take action.”

“The Holy Order?”

“Yeah. Their main role is to challenge the Woodlands by the saviors’ sides, but they also maintain global order. They’re the strongest military force in the world. The church grants all of their

actions religious legitimacy. If they make a move, even a margrave is going to fall to ruin.”

Meaning such a risk would be unthinkable, unless he was planning on destroying his family’s legacy. The only reason Maclaurin came out for this incident when he wasn’t really involved was solely to harass a hated political enemy. It would be stupid to lose everything he had over something so petty.

“Well, that’s all secondhand knowledge from the commander. Anyway, the margrave can’t order an execution at his own discretion.”

“So...we don’t have to worry about her safety?”

Mikihiko nodded, but he had a gloomy look in his eyes. “Still... So long as she’s confined like this, I believe he will push as much of the blame on her as possible. Regardless of what actually happened, she’s in a position to take the blame. She’ll probably be sent under guard to the imperial capital, undergo a trial, and be sentenced.”

“Be sentenced to what, specifically?”

“According to her guess... She’ll be dismissed as the commander of the Third Company.”

“That can’t be!” Shiran practically screamed.

Even as Mikihiko looked at Shiran’s grief-stricken face with sympathy, he explained things to the very end.

“So long as the commander isn’t there, the Third Company will be forced to disband. Even if they can get going again, there’s no way she’ll be the one to lead them. Who knows whether they’d be able to reform at all. You saw what happened at Fort Tilia. So long as the saviors of the present age are here, the higher-ups of the Empire are going to take away as many achievements as possible from their rivals.”

“The Third Company...will disband...?” Shiran said, her voice trembling and hollow. Seeing this made her usual calm behavior almost seem like a lie. “No way... That can’t possibly...”

Shiran staggered, muttering in delirium. Her normally dignified posture now looked fragile. She managed to maintain enough self-control to stop herself from collapsing, but it looked like she could fall over at any time.

She had always strived to be a knight. This was equivalent to losing her place in life. That wasn’t all either. Because she was now an undead monster due to her battle against Juumonji, she would find it difficult to continue being a knight if she had to serve under anyone other than the commander.

“I am a knight, just as before. I will fight for the sake of those I must protect. I cannot thank the commander enough.”

That was what she had once told me with a smile. Just how big a shock would it be for her to lose her place as a knight? The mere

thought sent pain through my heart.

“Mikihiko... What should I do?” I was worried about Shiran, but right now we had to deal with the problem in front of us. I killed my urge to call out to Shiran and questioned Mikihiko instead. “The reason you came straight to me is because the commander had something she wanted me to do, right?”

“That makes things quick.”

“Not that I think I can do anything.”

I didn’t know whether I could even be of any use to her. She had been guaranteeing my safety all this time. The knights who fully supported her, knowing of our circumstances, had done so much for us. If she were no longer around, my standing in this world would become considerably more unstable.

“Sorry, but there’s not much I can really do. You’re not going to tell me to help you kick down Fort Serrata’s door to take her back, right?”

“Ha ha. Wouldn’t that be thrilling? It’d be awesome if we could, but unfortunately, that’s not it. Even if we could do that, it would just complicate things more,” Mikihiko said, showing me a smile for the first time today. “Takahiro, the commander’s request is about Shiran.”

“A-About me...?” Shiran said with a surprised gasp.

Mikihiko glanced her way with compassion and then said, “She wants you to see Shiran back to her hometown.”



According to the man I saved, the knights outside the town had been restrained as a precaution against any rescue attempts for the commander. So long as they obediently surrendered, no harm would come to her and she would remain under house arrest. There was one big problem, though—Shiran.

As the lieutenant of the commander’s company, Shiran served as her right hand. The people who had arrested the commander wanted to restrain Shiran above all others. That would be a terrible development, however.

Shiran was now an undead monster. If a third party were to capture her, they’d very likely discover this fact. It was unclear whether her extenuating circumstances would be taken into consideration, especially if Elf-Hater Maclaurin was involved.

In that sense, it was fortunate Shiran had been staying with us in this suburb. The commander had prepared this building for us, but it didn’t belong to the Alliance Knights. That placed it outside of Maclaurin’s sight. If not, he would’ve already moved in on it.

“The commander can’t go with you,” Mikihiko said, “but once the trial is over, she’ll presumably return home. In the meantime, she

wants you to take Shiran and Kei with you and wait in their village.”

I couldn't possibly leave Shiran on her own, and I didn't have any destination in mind, anyway. I agreed to the commander's request, immediately gathered our luggage, and got going. We didn't have time to get all necessary preparations for the journey in order, but fortunately, the knights still had a surplus of provisions for the trip that they yielded to us. We could just buy what we needed at the next town, and if need be, we could also hunt monsters for food. I also had the money the commander had given me as recompense for our services that I could use as traveling expenses.

“We got out of town more easily than I thought we would...” I muttered from the driver's seat of the manamobile.

“I'm sure they have their hands full dealing with the knights outside the town,” Mikihiko said from inside the carriage. “There are fifty knights that they know of. They had to use up a significant amount of personnel in the unlikely case the knights resisted. They don't have enough men left to close the roads.”

When we left town, we saw a merchant passing us making a fuss about a ton of soldiers coming down from Serrata. Much like Mikihiko had said, Maclaurin had sent the majority of the forces at his beck and call out to secure the knights.

Those soldiers were probably in the process of escorting the knights into Serrata by now. Even if news of the fleeing knight and our interference reached them, Serrata was a half day's trip away from the suburb. They wouldn't be able to stop us from leaving.

We mixed in among the flow of peddlers out of town and took the road south. Aker, one of the Five Northern Kingdoms, was a small country located to the southwest of Lorenz County. The safe route there was to first take the road west straight through Longue County, whose southern region bordered Aker. However, half of this border was covered by Dark Woods, and the other half by the precipitous Kitrus Mountains, so it was dangerous to head south from Longue County. That was why the typical route, the one that peddlers used, took a roundabout path further west to Cornisch County. Then it followed a road that ran parallel to Aralia River, a large river that ran down the center of the continent and branched southeast into Aker.

However, since this was the established and safe route, it was possible pursuers would come after us. That was why we started by heading south to take a different route to the southwest. This suggestion had also come from the commander. Unlike regular merchants, we could sacrifice some amount of safety without much trouble. Our journey through the most dangerous lands in this world, the Woodlands, wasn't just for show.

That night, we set up camp alongside the road. Wrapped up in a mantle, I sat against a tree, feeling Lily's weight and body heat as she nestled up against me as my guard. I was wide awake. My eyes were fixed on Gerbera, who was sound asleep under the moonlight with our luggage in her arms while Ayame, snoring peacefully, lay curled up in a ball on her spider belly.

I suddenly felt a gaze on me. Shiran, also wrapped up in a mantle, was looking my way with her blue eye. Her white skin stood out against the darkness of the night, though not to the extent of Gerbera's.

"Is this really all right with you?" she asked.

A short question. She had remained quiet ever since we left, always deep in thought—here in body, but not in spirit. That was simply how big of a shock this was to her. Now, however, she appeared levelheaded. There was no trembling in her voice. She had apparently managed to recover over the latter half of the day...at least to the level where she could keep up appearances.

"Is what all right?" I asked.

"Taking me to my hometown. If my identity is discovered, it will become quite inconvenient for you, Takahiro."

"Don't worry about that," I told her, shrugging my shoulders. Well, shoulder. Lily was stuck to the other. "Going with you isn't all that bad a choice for me. We're still unfamiliar with this world, after all. It'd be difficult for us to look for a peaceful place to live, stumbling around until we found it. Besides, I can't use a translation runestone. I'll be totally helpless if I can't communicate with anyone."

"In that case, you could have just taken Kei with you. She can use one just fine," Shiran said, shooting a glance over to her niece sleeping soundly next to her. "She is still inept in some ways, but she should serve you more than—"

"Shiran."

I cut her off. She looked down at the ground. She really wasn't back to her normal self yet. This was perfectly understandable, considering the circumstances. I couldn't possibly leave her alone in such a state.

"I've been carrying a bomb around to begin with. Nothing changes from having you with me. There's no need to worry about something so insignificant."

Even if that weren't the case, I doubted that I could abandon this elf. The abominable strife Juumonji had caused brought nothing but loss. If there was one thing I could say I'd gained from it, it was the bond of trust I now had with these girls. There was no way I could possibly betray it.

"Besides, the commander asked me directly to do this before all of

this happened,” I muttered.

“Directly, you say?” Shiran asked, looking back up at me.

“Yeah. I don’t know if she expected it would turn out like this, though.”

“Please continue to take care of Shiran, Takahiro.”

The words she had told me that night in the reclamation village came to mind. I didn’t know her intention at the time. Rather than saying it in anticipation of these events, she might have spoken them out of simple concern for Shiran’s future. The one thing I was certain of was that she had entrusted Shiran to me. I didn’t plan on throwing that trust away.



Dawn came uneventfully. We were keeping on guard, but no pursuers were coming after us. Either it was the right choice to take the road south, or there were no pursuers to begin with.

After having breakfast, we quickly finished our preparations to get going. I boarded the manamobile but soon cocked my head.

“Mikihiko?”

I looked down from the driver’s seat at my friend, who was standing in his traveling outfit with three knights.

“What’s up? Get on. You’re not telling me you want to walk, right?”

The manamobile only moved at walking pace, but it really reduced the fatigue of long-distance travel. There was no reason to go out of the way to walk.

“Yup, that’s exactly what I’m gonna do,” Mikihiko said with a nod. “To Serrata, that is.”

This was rather abrupt, but I wasn’t surprised. Maybe I knew somewhere within me that he would do this.

“If anyone did come after us,” he continued, “I thought I’d be able to talk them out of it somehow, seeing how I’m known as a savior even in Fort Serrata... Seems that’s not necessary anymore.”

“Are you going to the commander?”

“It’s better to have even one more person who can advocate for her, right? My status as savior makes me wanna hurl...but I’ll use it as best I can.”

Mikihiko flashed me a grin. The knight standing next to him also smiled brazenly as he raised his hand.

“Please be at ease, sir. We’ll be going with him. We can’t allow something to happen on the way to Serrata, after all.”

“Marcus...? And you two as well?” Shiran muttered.

She came out of the manamobile, her eye wide in shock. She couldn’t find the words to say and simply stood there with her fist

clenched tightly over her armored chest. Their determination was strong. It was clear there was no convincing them otherwise.

“Don’t give me that look, Takahiro,” Mikihiko said with a laugh. “I’m sure you’ll be lonely, but this won’t be our final farewell.”

His tone was frivolous, but it wasn’t because he was being thoughtless. I knew this very well, so I managed to return his smile, albeit weakly.

“Yeah. This isn’t the end...”

Here in this world rife with danger, it was guaranteed that I would part ways with some of the people I met and never see them again. It was different from the world we came from. Transportation and communication here were less than satisfactory. Monsters awaited outside any town, so just moving from one to another was a fatal risk. Even with our group, who had enough strength to overcome such difficulties, we had our own circumstances to deal with. It wouldn’t be strange if we were forced to part at some point.

Both Mikihiko and I were fully aware of this. Our reunion after the Colony’s destruction was already a miracle to begin with.

Regardless, I told him, “I’ll be going ahead. Finish things up nicely and get back to us quickly.”

The commander had saved Mikihiko’s life. He was always doing his best to be of use to her. That was his way. Much like how I had decided to live on as Lily’s master, he had resolved himself to live for the commander’s sake. In that case, we wouldn’t lose heart so easily.

“Right on. We’ll meet again.”

Mikihiko gave me a strong nod, then smiled as he turned around and waved his hand.

I was off to Aker, while Mikihiko walked to Serrata. We each began traveling down our own paths.

Chapter 15: A Small Thorn in the Journey

After parting ways with Mikihiko and the knights, we went south down the road in the opposite direction from Serrata. Our journey proceeded smoothly without incident. When we were going north, our speed had been influenced by the large group we were moving with, which had also made it easier for monsters to find us. That wasn't the case this time around. We didn't stop by any villages on the way other than to resupply, so it was taking only about two-thirds the time it would normally take to cover the same distance.

Shiran had initially been shocked at the potential disbandment of her company, but she managed to regain her usual composure by the end of the day. She was actually inspired now, seeing it as her duty to bring me to Aker. The one time we spotted monsters in the distance, she charged forth and defeated them in an instant. She wasn't quite back to normal, but at the very least, it was a relief to see her like this rather than an empty husk.

We arrived at a relatively large travelers' stop, not quite the size of the one in the suburbs of Serrata—where roads leading in all cardinal directions met. We filled up on supplies and then took the route to the west. To the southwest of Lorenz County was Cedrus, one of the Five Northern Kingdoms. Our destination was situated west of there.

The border between Lorenz County and Cedrus wasn't close to the precipitous parts of the Kitrus Mountains, but we still had to cross a few mountainous roads. They were old ones, once the site of the battle between the Empire and the Alliance centuries ago, but now they were rarely used.

The risk of encountering monsters in regions near the Woodlands was high. No merchants would go out of their way to cross a steep mountainside just to get to a small remote country. And since nobody used these mountain roads, monsters here were pretty much left at large. As a result, the Kitrus Mountains were a danger zone where many monsters lived. Having said that, as a monster tamer, this land was rather relaxing to me. Being a danger zone meant there would be much less human attention to worry about.

I sat on the driver's seat as always, slowly steering the manamobile through the Kitrus Mountains. The road was narrow,

almost as if it were forced to weave its way through the trees. The vehicle's noisy shaking emphasized how poor the road conditions were. In contrast to our ride from Fort Tilia, where all the roads were maintained for military use, these paths to far-off reclamation villages had been created for transporting goods. It made sense they'd be unfavorable by comparison.

I listened to the clattering wheels as a thought naturally drifted into my mind. I recalled the image of my friend's face when we parted ways ten days ago. If he had managed to reunite with the commander, they were likely in the middle of moving from Serrata to the imperial capital. Considering Mikihiko's personality, it was even possible he had enlisted the help of Miyoshi Taichi and the other students in the suburbs to help out.

"Oh, Master. Isn't that it?" Lily said, sitting by my side.

We found ourselves at a confusing fork in the road. According to what we'd heard in another village, we could follow one of these branches to the village closest to the mountain road we were aiming for. After that, there would be no more human settlements, meaning this was our last supply point until we reached Aker. Crossing a mountain range was sure to take some time, so I wanted to secure as many provisions as possible.

"Hopefully they'll sell to us. That last village wouldn't sell us anything regardless of our money..." I grumbled.

"Well, they've got their own circumstances to deal with," Lily commented. "There's no point in feeling down if they don't. If worse comes to worst, I can just go hunting."

"I'd rather not go back to a firefang diet, though..."

Lily, Kei, and I went on foot to gather supplies, while the others waited in the manamobile. The only ones who could show themselves in front of humans and possessed considerable combat strength were Shiran and Lily. One of them went with us, while the other stayed behind so that we didn't have to worry about being seen even if there was a monster attack.

The reason Kei was with me was because she and Shiran were the only ones who could use translation runestones. She walked behind us with the hood of her mantle pulled down over her head.

"Huh? Master, someone's running this way."

It had been some time since we split from the girls in the manamobile, leaving them in the forest off the road. When we came out onto the narrow path leading into the village, a man ran our way, looking desperate.

"O-Oh! Are you travelers? What bad timing to come here!"

The man claimed he was a resident of the nearby reclamation

village. He had gone out with his companions to cut down trees, but they'd encountered monsters. After that, he had run all the way here for dear life. Unlike the Woodlands, the forests around here didn't possess much mana. Having said that, the Fringes were only an hour away by foot, so it wasn't strange for monsters to be in the area.

After we persuaded the man, who kept telling us to run away, we hurried over to the reclamation village. There we found a giant over three meters tall—a wild ogre. It had short legs and long arms like a gorilla, but its muscular body was mostly hairless. Its exposed skin was green, and it wore a fur pelt wreathed around its waist. Its bald head, which was relatively small compared to its build, looked similar to a human's, but its ears were pointed and two large fangs stuck up from its enormous lower jaw.

The wild ogre roamed around the village as if keeping an eye out for an opening in its defenses. Once in a while, it charged at the walls. Each time it did, the people manning the defenses poured down concentrated magic from the ramparts. They were only using grade 2 magic, so there wasn't much force behind the attacks. Focused together, however, it was enough to cause the wild ogre to flinch. Combined with the arrows they loosed in tandem, they slowly chiseled away at the monster.

That wasn't enough to deal a decisive blow, however. Wild ogres were more powerful than even bull wrigglers. They were said to be one of the stronger monsters of the Fringes. It would be fine if it simply gave up on its attack and left, but if the wild ogre started rampaging because of its minor wounds and made its way into the village, it would certainly cause a number of casualties.

Even if it didn't make its way into the village, it could damage the walls by throwing an uprooted tree with its massive arms. These walls were the very lifeline of the village, and damage to them could also result in severe injuries for anyone in the vicinity. I had nothing to do with this village, but I couldn't just leave them be.

"Lily, it's a little far away, but can you get it?"

I implicitly told her not to charge in. She probably wouldn't get hurt by the rain of magic and arrows, but she would stand out a little too much.

"Yup. I'll give it a go," she answered, understanding what I meant as she twirled her spear around with a nod.

"Wh-What are you doing...?" the man who had guided us asked as he curiously watched Lily hold her black spear in a reverse grip. "A-Anyway, we should run a—"

"It's okay. You don't need to worry," Lily told him.

A glyph appeared in her right hand. It was grade 2 wind magic. She refrained from using grade 3 magic because it was the highest

grade the people of this world could utilize. We didn't want to attract unnecessary attention while in public. It would be a different matter if we were in an emergency situation, though. Conversely, this meant that Lily had judged grade 2 magic would be enough to handle this situation. She took two steps forward to line herself up, then stepped in once more at full force.

“Yaaaah!”

She threw her spear. The weapon already had plenty of force behind it, but it rode the wind she'd unleashed, propelling it faster and guiding it toward its target. The wind also repelled nearby arrows as the weapon plunged directly into the wild ogre's face.

An ear-splitting scream pierced the air. The sharp spearpoint tore through its eyeball, and the turbulent winds coiling around the grip ripped its face apart. Blue blood spurted out like a fountain. Having lost its vision, the wild ogre staggered. Its massive body had suffered some serious damage.

The villagers were dumbfounded by the sudden attack, but they quickly realized this was a terrific opportunity. Armed men charged out of the village with a battle cry. The villager with us watched from beginning to end, sinking to his knees from the sheer shock of the moment. He looked up at Lily as she flashed me a smile and threw him a peace sign.



The villagers were very friendly to us after we helped with the monster that was attacking them. As a result, we safely managed to procure supplies. We ended up buying potatoes and dried meat. I was grateful we could replenish our provisions, even if only a little.

“We truly cannot thank you enough,” an old man said to me, seeing us off to the village gates.

“Don't worry about it. You've done a lot for us as well.”

“But to think such a sweet little lady could deliver such an intense strike.”

The village chief, who had more wrinkles than his age would suggest, smiled pleasantly as he continued to praise Lily's skills. He was the friendliest among the villagers. His long-windedness was probably because he considered talking with guests to be a form of entertainment. Because of that, we ended up staying longer than expected. We did manage to acquire everything we needed in proportion to the time spent here, at least—both in terms of supplies and information.

From what he told us, the village chief had used the mountain road we were headed toward when he was young. He taught us of the landmarks we could use on the way. This was decades-old

information, so it wasn't guaranteed the landmarks would still be there, but it was better than knowing nothing.

Also, there was supposedly a special mist that covered the mountain road once in a while. The village chief had never seen it for himself, but his predecessor had warned him about it. In short, he had been told to be careful of the mountain path when a dense fog rolled though.

Well, that much made perfect sense. Going down a mountain road with limited visibility due to fog was reckless and dangerous. Still, it was good to know of such things in advance. Sating his curiosity in exchange for such valuable information was well worth it.

"Excuse me, but are you perhaps from the north? From the region around the imperial capital?" he asked us in an exaggerated low voice. It was like this was meant to be a secret.

"Well... Something like that," I replied.

"Oooh, I thought that'd be the case," the chief continued with a deep nod. "So you two really are of blessed blood?"

Many of the saviors' descendants apparently lived in the northern Empire around the imperial capital. It was great that he'd misunderstood without us having to bring it up ourselves. From their perspective, saviors going around on a journey in a small group was pretty much out of the question. It would be a different story if news of the current generation of saviors had gotten this far, but it seemed it hadn't reached such a remote area yet.

"But to come all the way out here... Why exactly would you—" the chief started, but he suddenly suspected something and swallowed his words. "No, never mind. I'll pray for your journey to go safely."

"Thank you."

I forced a smile. There were quite a few of blessed blood who held noble titles. The saviors themselves had no such peerage, but they had many opportunities to mingle with those of high social status. The imperial nobles also proactively added savior blood into their families, so the ratio of saviors' descendants who were nobles was rather high.

There were of course many to whom this didn't apply. Still, meeting someone of blessed blood in such a remote region was rare. It wasn't strange for the village chief to assume we were nobles.

He probably thought we were people of high standing disguising ourselves as travelers. Nobles, who could receive advanced training at a young age, and the guards tasked with protecting such nobles obviously possessed the skills to defeat a wild ogre. I was thankful he had convinced himself of such; I hadn't needed to make up any lies.

"Now then, it's about time for us to get going," I said, seeing this as an opportunity to end our conversation. If I kept the others waiting too long, Gerbera was liable to make a fuss. I didn't mind listening to

her complain, but it would be troublesome if she started sulking over it.

“Okay, are you two ready to... Hm?”

I started addressing Lily and Kei, but I came to a stop. Kei wasn't reacting to me. I couldn't see her face because she was wearing a hood and looking the other way, but she seemed to be staring at something in a daze. I looked in the same direction, where the wild ogre's corpse lay.

The villagers had buried only half of the wild ogre, and they'd placed a pile of hay next to it. Evil had to be burned and purified, hence this ritual. The minute details differed from village to village, but it was a common custom throughout this world. This wasn't necessarily the case for monsters that had useful fur or meat, but the wild ogre had no such use. This sight shouldn't have been unusual.

“Kei?” I called out to her once more.

“Oh. Yes?” She finally noticed me and turned my way. “S-Sorry. I zoned out.”

She looked a little flustered, perhaps because she thought she had made some kind of mistake. She smiled as if to gloss it over. In the next instant, her childish features were colored with surprise. A little boy was suddenly running our way. He looked around five or six years old. His parents were probably too busy dealing with the wild ogre's disposal. He looked up at Lily and me with sparkling eyes. His footsteps were careless and unreliable. Just as I thought that...

“Oh.”

I didn't even have time to shout a warning. The boy's foot got caught on something and he tripped.

“A-Are you okay?”

Kei was the closest among us and ran over to the boy. She knelt down and stood him back up. I figured he would cry, but he didn't. This was a fundamental difference between the five-year-olds I knew and the ones raised in such villages. Having said that, children were still children.

“Thanks, lady.”

He looked up at Kei's hooded face. His smile was soothing to any who saw it...

“Huh?”

But his eyes suddenly turned to saucers as he raised his voice curiously. He stared blankly at Kei, then turned around and looked at the wild ogre's corpse.

“Hm?”

He raised his voice again, then turned back to Kei. At this distance, he could see under her hood.

“Hey lady, your ears are weird. They're like that monster's.”

His innocent words froze Kei's smile completely.



We left the village and immediately continued our journey. We couldn't reach the mountain road within the day, so we got ready to camp out for the night before it got dark.

"Excuse me, Takahiro. Could I borrow some of your time?" Shiran asked in the middle of our preparations. Her expression looked grim.

Shiran took me a small distance away from the others. Lily gave me a glance, but I waved her off, telling her there was nothing to worry about. After we got far enough so that the others couldn't hear us, she cut to the chase.

"Kei has been acting rather strange as of late. Did something happen at the village?"

"Oh... Yeah, just a little something."

I glanced over at Kei, who was carrying a pot over to the fire. Her expression clearly lacked its usual luster. Ever since we left the village, it was clear as day that she was feeling depressed. It was natural for her guardian to be worried. I briefly explained what had passed to Shiran.

"I see... So that's what happened..." Shiran muttered with a sigh of understanding.

"I'm pretty sure the kid didn't have any ill intent."

The boy from the village had thanked us and returned to his parents. That was why he had run out to see us. He was a good kid at heart. He had merely said exactly what was on his mind when he saw Kei's ears. It was a little cruel to criticize him for a lack of consideration. If pushed to say it, I'd describe it as the wrong person had greeted him at the wrong time.

"Honestly, I didn't think Kei would get such a shock from it," I added.

It showed how worried about it she was. Perhaps the cheerful girl was actually in a daze because she was focused on the wild ogre's ears herself.

"There are many monsters in this world who bear a resemblance to humans," Shiran said listlessly. "A large majority of them have ears much like we elves do." She touched her tapered ears. This was the defining trait of her race that separated her from the rest of humanity. "There are those who slander us because of such facts."

"Oh, I get it now. So that's why Kei's reaction was overly sensitive."

"Yes. From the perspective of such people, we elves are no more than strange monsters who can speak the human language." Shiran paused before her single eye suddenly widened. "That was a slip of

the tongue. Please forgive me.”

That was a very precise description of my servants. Shiran apologetically lowered her head as I waved it off.

“Don’t worry about it. I know that’s not what you meant. Those aren’t your words to begin with, right? In any case, it’s awfully unreasonable.”

Racism summed it up pretty handily. There were also monsters who resembled humans and had rounded ears. Gerbera, who was playing with Ayame right now, was one such case. She was an extreme exception among arachnes, but there were other monsters with such bodily features, few as they were. The humans who disparaged elves like this turned a blind eye to whatever was inconvenient to their claims. Actually, it didn’t really matter to them. They thought those who differed from the majority were eerie.

This didn’t only apply to elves. For example, there were also the cattlemen we had seen wandering around southern Lorenz County. I’d heard that people looked down on them as if they were beneath everyone else. At its root, revulsion toward others who differed from oneself was a very physiological thing. Such people were being irrational. From their perspective, it didn’t matter so long as they could find fault one way or another.

As a result, Kei was overly sensitive about her distinctive ears. The essence of the problem didn’t have anything to do with the boy innocently pointing it out. Coming to that understanding, I scowled at how deeply rooted the problem was.

Shiran, on the other hand, treated it rather lightly. “If that’s all it was, there’s no need to worry about her.”

“Are you sure? Kei looks pretty depressed to me.”

I found this rather unexpected of her. Shiran was strict, but she appeared to be very soft on Kei. I thought she would be more worried with Kei feeling down like this, but Shiran shook her head.

“For any born as an elf, getting depressed over something so simple would make it impossible to earn a living outside their home.”

There was a feeling of reality to her words, causing me to hesitate for a moment.

“So...you really did overcome such a thing yourself?”

“My case was a little special,” Shiran answered with a bitter smile. “When I was about her age, I enlisted as a knight and lost my older brother. I didn’t have time to worry about how others saw me. All I could focus on was catching up to him. Thinking back on it now, I’m sure I caused the commander a fair amount of anxiety...”

Shiran’s older brother was Kei’s father. I’d heard that he had died in the middle of a mission. I could read from Shiran’s behavior that he had an enormous effect on the development of her personality.

“In any case, it would be one thing if she were to spend her whole life in the village, but if she wishes to be a knight, this is a trial she must overcome.”

“Isn’t it okay to at least talk to her about it?”

I wasn’t being persistent because I thought Shiran was wrong or anything. She had a good point. There was no mistaking her logic. Still, it was difficult to be right sometimes. I knew how hard it was for the average person to stay strong all by themselves. I was rather weak myself, after all.

It was precisely because of Lily and the other girls that I clung to life and kept a stout heart. This might not have applied to Shiran, but at the very least, I believed the still young Kei needed the support of others. Her aunt was the most suitable person to fulfill this role. Shiran was of a different opinion, however.

“I cannot be there by her side forever.”

Her voice was like the northern winds. There was a coldness behind it, but it wasn’t directed at Kei. It was directed at herself. Before I could say anything, though, Shiran’s expression changed completely as she flashed me a smile.

“Although...I suppose there’s nothing to worry about.”

Her smile was filled with warmth and happiness. I didn’t know what had her so pleased.

“To begin with,” she continued, “this matter was only a shock to her because of its suddenness and because you were there to witness it, Takahiro.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because she places much of her faith and favor in you. I am sure she would’ve preferred you not to witness such an unpleasant scene.”

Is that how it works? I wondered. I didn’t really get it. To my eyes, Kei looked far more emotionally attached to Katou, and Gerbera was much more of a friend to her. I remained unconvinced.

Shiran’s smile broadened even further. “Besides, it doesn’t seem like I need to do anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“It appears you are not the only one paying close attention to her needs,” Shiran replied, shifting her gaze over to Kei. She was gathered with everyone as they cooked over the pot together.



Everyone else naturally noticed that the youngest member of our group, discounting Ayame and Asarina, was feeling down. As they made preparations for dinner, Lily continuously conversed with her.

Lily was rather skilled at household activities. Camping outdoors was kind of an entirely different skill set, but she properly managed

on this front as well. She also seemed to enjoy this manner of work, so even though we had enough hands to go around now, she was very proactive in making our meals.

After politely driving me off, Lily and Katou cooked dinner while engaging Kei. A short distance away, I had a mock battle with Rose. Back when we were looking at different kinds of weapons, Rose had decided to change her equipment. She wasn't wielding a one-handed battleaxe anymore.

Rose held a single enormous ax with both hands. It was a poleaxe called a bardiche. A large blade curved over about a third of the grip. She had tied a cloth over the edge for our battle. This was a precaution against accidents, seeing as there wasn't as large a gap between myself and Rose as there was with Gerbera. Also, she wasn't used to her new weapon yet.

"Well then, prepare yourself," Rose declared.

Our training session began. I barely warded off her hearty blow with my shield and thrust out with my sword. She narrowly dodged this in turn. At a glance, it looked like I was contending with her, but Rose was reviewing each and every movement she'd been taught, so she was restraining her swings. I was somewhat able to fight now, but I still had a long way to go.

Shiran, her arms folded, watched over our exchange of offense and defense. Rose also wanted guidance in the basics of martial arts, so I hadn't crossed blades with Shiran lately. Instead, she watched over us like this and pointed out anything she noticed. Having said that, she appeared a little restless today. I knew the reason for this, so I didn't blame her for it. Despite what she had said, Shiran wasn't as strict as she let on.

Incidentally, I was still keeping up my practical training with Gerbera in addition to this more traditional sparring, but that took place early in the mornings. Gerbera spent most evenings at this time playing with Ayame.

As a small digression, Gerbera couldn't cook. Aside from anything related to clothing, she wasn't very handy. She could eat all of her prey raw, so she didn't actually understand the necessity for cooking. This led to a complete lack of interest. As for Rose, she had a lot of other work on her plate, but even without any of that, she also couldn't cook. Lily was actually the weird one for being able to cook despite being a monster.

I finished up my training just around the time dinner was ready. After everyone gathered together for a meal, it was time for studying. I had Shiran give me a lecture regarding magic. Katou also participated in this class.

A short time later, a shrill cheer broke out a small distance away.

It seemed Rose had taken out one of her trial-and-error works in front of the group. They were all gathered around a simple telescope.

“So it’s possible to make a telescope from scratch, huh?” I muttered, watching Lily gaze at the moon through it.

“Looks like it. It doesn’t appear to have much magnification, though,” Katou replied from my side.

“We picked up the lens she’s using while buying dyes,” Shiran added. “It doesn’t quite match the quality of what is available in your world, so I was worried it wouldn’t work. I’m relieved to see she succeeded.”

“Are there telescopes here too?” I asked.

“There are. Those that work well are used as military equipment. They’re fairly useless in the Woodlands with all the trees blocking the view, so they weren’t available in Fort Tilia. I’ve never held one for myself.”

“In that case, how about you go join them?”

As usual, Gerbera was the most excited. Kei was also enjoying herself immensely. I glanced over at them as Shiran watched on with the eye of a guardian.



“I don’t really mind if we skip one day of lectures,” I suggested.

“That’s true. I don’t mind either,” Katou added.

Shiran shook her head. “No. I’ll refrain for now. Spending time with your servants like this is sure to encourage Kei. I believe it would be better if I didn’t join.”

“I see...”

I more or less understood where Shiran was coming from. To the young Kei, spending time with beings far more inhuman than she was could help overturn her complex. On the other hand, spending time with a young girl like Kei was also good for my servants.

It was better if both Shiran and I were not there. It was a little lonely, but this was what it meant to watch over their growth. As I thought that, something else suddenly attracted my attention.

Katou was staring fixedly at Shiran as the two of us watched over the others.

“Is something the matter, Mana?” Shiran asked.

“No... It’s nothing.” Katou shook her head and averted her gaze. “It’s probably just my own misunderstanding...”



The following day, we set out on the mountain road around noon. We had come this far without incident, so there was no need to worry about pursuit from the Empire. If they did send anyone out from Serrata, they would’ve caught up with us already. The probability of it happening now was pretty slim. Such judgment was perfectly sound...at least when considering imperial pursuers.

Chapter 16: A Beast's Confession

The route through the Kitrus Mountains was rugged. To avoid rapid changes in elevation, the road meandered about, snaking around the cliffs. Because of this, the distance we had to cover was multiple times that of a straight line to our destination. But despite the road's layout, we came across multiple slopes the manamobile couldn't surmount with its torque, forcing us to get out and push.

The one saving grace was that the roads were wide. This was a relic of the era of the war between the Empire and the Alliance, when they had maintained this road. Still, steep slopes were only the tip of the iceberg. Fallen trees lay across the road, greenery swamped our path, and years of landslides obstructed our passage.

If we were walking, at worst, we could force our way straight over the mountain with the girls' strength. That didn't work with a vehicle, however. It would have been nice if there had been detours we could take, but there was nothing so convenient at hand.

Having said that, we could technically abandon the manamobile, but the commander had lent it to us. Even if that wasn't the case, once we were through the mountain, some of us needed the vehicle to hide ourselves from the public eye. Back in our world, we might have been forced to give up and turn back.

I looked down at the umpteenth obstacle of our journey. Further down the cliff lay toppled trees hollowed out from rot, and poisonous-looking mushrooms were growing from them. They must've tumbled down in a landslide years ago. Considering how few travelers used this path, the lack of maintenance was to be expected. We had to do some amount of repairs to get through.

"Lily, I've finished checking to the front," Shiran said, coming back from scouting ahead on her own.

She was once more donning her knight's armor, having judged that no pursuers from the Empire were coming. Her gallant figure came to a stop on the other side of the broken road.

"I don't sense anyone nearby. We're good to cross whenever you're ready," she reported.

We hadn't passed by anyone yet, but this road wasn't entirely unused. Whenever we wanted to do something conspicuous, we had to make sure nobody was around to see it.

Lily was kneeling and looking at the ground. "Okay. Here I go,"

she said, standing back up and stretching out her right hand.

A yellow glyph took shape at her fingertips. This was grade 2 earth magic, one of the elements she had acquired by eating a large number of monsters at Fort Tilia. Dirt bulged up over the landslide-ravaged road. Lily did this several times, filling in the gaps.

Her newly acquired earth magic was tremendously useful at times like these. Even on the way here, Lily had practiced her new tricks by moving aside trees that were in the way and repairing potholes.

It had its limits, of course. Earth magic was versatile, but even to the untrained eye, it was clear that Lily's feats weren't particularly advanced. For example, there were magic specialists affiliated with the army who were employed as construction workers.

In Lily's case, she could create earth to fill in holes, but she couldn't make it hard and sturdy like the original road. Manamobiles were made under the assumption that they'd be moving on even ground, so going over such a rugged surface risked damaging the vehicle. Be that as it may, what couldn't be accomplished by one person could be done with the help of another. The path was open now thanks to Lily. There were no obstacles, and we had a reasonable foothold. It just wasn't suitable for the manamobile.

"Okay Gerbera, have at it," Lily said.

"Mm."

Gerbera nodded and stooped over, fixing her eight legs in place. She reached out and grasped the mud shield at the front of the vehicle. The manamobile creaked, and Gerbera effortlessly picked it up off the ground. The sight made one wonder whether it was made of paper, but the sturdy vehicle was as heavy as it looked. Its frame, which Rose had reinforced beforehand, was even creaking under its own weight.

Gerbera's legs remained stable as she walked over the rugged ground Lily's magic had made. She kept any vertical movements to a minimum, carrying the car absolutely level with bizarrely smooth movements. Her physical strength was awe inspiring, and her sense of balance was also extraordinary. Having done this multiple times already, there was no uncertainty in her transportation work.

"Picking up a vehicle and walking around with it kind of feels like putting the cart before the horse," I muttered.

"True. You have a point," Katou replied with a giggle as she stood next to me.

Rose, who was supervising the work next to Katou, gave instructions to the white arachne. "Gerbera, it's tilting a little to the right. Please be careful."

"Oh. Affirmative. In any case, this vehicle was modified by your hands, so I do not believe it will break from such a trifle."

"It's still better to keep the burden to a minimum, isn't it?"

"Hmm. That's also true," Gerbera replied with a smile.

I'd only realized this recently, but the magnanimous yet somewhat absentminded Gerbera balanced out the serious and methodical Rose very well.

Gerbera let out a laugh and handled the manamobile with unexpected dexterity, keeping it from shaking as she looked up at it.

"Well, I suppose I should be more careful than usual. I mean, Kei is still inside."

"I trust you, Gerbera," a childish and cheerful voice replied from within the vehicle.

"How's the view from up there?"

"It feels kind of strange. There's no vibration or anything. It's fresh and interesting!"

"So long as you're enjoying yourself."

The two of them continued chatting. Gerbera had suggested that Kei stay inside the manamobile. As a result, the tiresome work of having to move it over obstructions became an impromptu attraction. Their fun was contagious. Just watching it unfold kept me entertained.

Dealing with these roadblocks had become a routine. Even though we had the leisure for such fun now, it had been a serious problem when we first started on this mountain path. In the end, Gerbera often had to tow the vehicle. We were able to proceed by doing so, but with all the shaking from the uneven road, the manamobile wasn't suitable for riding.

When we got out to walk, however, the surprisingly steep inclines sapped our stamina away. Unlike myself, now that I could use mana, and Kei, who had been training to become a knight despite her young age, Katou couldn't keep up at all. The roads were bad enough that Rose had to carry her rather frequently.

Depending on the circumstances, securing a path wide enough for the manamobile could stall us for several hours. There'd also been moments where the vehicle had flipped over, leaving us all pale, and times when we'd spent half a day fixing a broken wheel.

Once in a while, we encountered monsters. It was dangerous facing an attack on such a narrow path, and we had to protect the vehicle and the road itself so that they wouldn't suffer damage during the battle.

We weren't really in a rush, so we were just going at our own pace. Still, before we knew it, nearly ten days had passed since we started on this mountain road. If the village chief of that last reclamation village we visited was right, one of the Aralia River's branches ran through the Kitrus Mountains at the halfway point. Now that we were used to traversing the mountain, it was possible the

second half of our journey would go by faster.

We had managed to resupply back at that last reclamation village, so we still had a surplus of food. It looked like we were going to get through this mountain range without incident. That was what I believed. I didn't know how mistaken I was until the next day.



Unease was apparently something one could sense even while asleep.

It was morning. I opened my heavy eyelids and was met with red eyes peering down at me. They almost looked entranced.

It wasn't Lily. Meeting her gaze when I woke was a fairly common occurrence, but in most cases, that was from me waking up in her embrace. I was a pretty restless sleeper. I spent a fairly long time drifting in and out of consciousness while hugging her slightly cold body against mine. As such, finding that beloved girl right in front of me when I opened my eyes wasn't surprising.

However, things were different this morning. With no forewarning, at point-blank range, I saw a beautiful face that could even put a goddess to shame. Her bewitched expression froze over the moment I met her eyes. Something felt slightly off.

Aah, this is just like her, I thought to myself, trying to escape the reality before me.

"Oh. Uhhh..."

Her shocked breath tickled the sensitive skin around my lips. That sensation served as the switch to reboot my stalled consciousness.

"What are you doing, Gerbera?"

The white spider was totally stiff, leaning over my prone body. One hand was touching my chest, and the other was pressing against my cheek. Her dazzling white hair dangled down, a tuft of which had presumptuously slipped into the collar of my clothes. A spider leg was planted by each side of my head, supporting her leaning upper body. Her posture was practically screaming that she was going to steal a kiss from me.

"Y-You've got it wrong, My Lord," she said stiffly. "You've got it wrong."

I was pretty sure I had it exactly right. There wasn't much room for interpretation, given the situation. I looked at her dubiously, to which she responded with rapid-fire delivery.

"I-I'm holding it in properly."

I didn't need to ask *what* she was holding in. It would actually be more troublesome if I had her tell me.

"Watching you sleep so peacefully, all alone, ever since the break of dawn... Is that not a wonderful thing?"

Judging from the color of the sky, it was about an hour after dawn. Meaning she'd just confessed to staring at my face for that long without getting bored, but she didn't seem to pay that any mind. What's more, her confession wasn't over.

"And, as I continued to stare, I fell into a daze. Before I knew it, your face was right there before me... I-It wasn't on purpose. I definitely wasn't trying to assault you in your sleep. As for going with the flow and stealing a touch of your lips... I-I may have imagined it...just a little."

"Yeah. That's enough. I get the gist of it." I got her to stop there. I was getting more and more embarrassed as I listened to her. "Anyway, give me some space."

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

Gerbera pulled back a bit, and I finally got a handle on my surroundings. It was still early in the morning. The only ones nearby were Kei, Katou, and Ayame, who were all sound asleep. The only one who woke up because of our conversation was Ayame, who raised her snout to sniff the air, then plopped back down as if saying, "Nope, it's not breakfast time yet."

"Where are the others?"

"Just a short while ago, Lily left your safety to me and went to check on Rose's work. Shiran wasn't here when I woke up, but Lily mentioned she went to check on our surroundings."

"I see."

I knit my brows. Lily was probably trying to approach partial mimicry from a new direction. I hoped she wasn't pushing herself beyond her means. Her vitality as a slime was astounding, but to me, she was a precious girl. I couldn't help but worry.

Shiran also had a tendency to push herself too hard, so I worried about her too. Having said that, it felt like she had managed to calm down lately. When we first left Serrata, she had always charged forth like an arrow the moment she spotted a monster. After we reached this mountain road, she had yielded that role to Gerbera, now that we didn't have to worry as much about being seen.

It seemed that Shiran pushed herself the moment I took my eyes off her, so I needed to check in on her eventually, but Lily was the one I had to do something about sooner rather than later. If the opportunity arose, it might be a good idea to call her out... But first, I had to deal with Gerbera.

"Um, Gerbera?"

"Wh-What is it, My Lord?"

Gerbera looked at me like a child caught doing something wrong. I smiled wryly.

"I'm not really angry, so don't act all scared."

I couldn't really criticize her for relaxing out of sight of the others and falling into a daze while gazing at her loved one's sleeping face. It was normal for a growing girl. Gerbera seemed a little bashful that she saw me in such a light, but it didn't feel bad. The way she inadvertently began swaying back toward me was really like her. The fact that she was keeping herself from crossing over that final line while doing so was slightly astonishing, but it wasn't something to get angry about.

"But...I wouldn't mind if you at least untied me."

"Untie you...?"

Gerbera cocked her head. I guided her with my gaze down at my own body. Her eyes followed mine, and she spotted how I was wrapped up in her threads. I couldn't move at all. I was bound up completely.

"Hwah?!" Gerbera shrieked hysterically. She really hadn't noticed. I pretty much guessed that this was the case. "S-Sorry. I-I did it unconsciously, or I mean, instinctively, I mean, I didn't do it because I was thinking to..."

"I told you I'm not angry. You don't need to apologize."

I forced a smile, feeling a little uneasy at how much of a trance she'd been in.

"But be careful from now on," I told her as she reached for her threads in a fluster to untie me. "Lying in wait while someone is asleep and tying them up is something meant to be done between lovers."

Her fingers stopped with a jolt.

"Lovers...?" she quietly muttered. Her slender eyebrow rose at the thought.

"Gerbera?"

Her hands had come to a complete stop, leaving me still restrained.

"Now that I think of it...it is rather rare for us to be able to talk all alone. This may be a good opportunity," Gerbera mumbled, then nodded. "I went and proudly told someone else, 'Why don't you tell my lord your feelings?'" So I'd be hopeless if I let such an opportunity pass... Okay!"

Gerbera fired herself up and turned her red eyes up to my face. By the time I could process that, the fearsome giant spider swooped down on me.

"Huh?"

Bound as I was, I couldn't even escape by reflex. Before I knew it, her supple arms were wrapped around my neck. The sensation of silky cloth brushed against the left side of my face. The two bulges inside the cloth pushed down on me with artless elasticity. My entire field of

vision was dominated by the low neckline of her white clothes, putting the smooth-looking skin of her cleavage within breathing distance.

“Wha—?!”

The moment I realized what was pressed against my face, my heart thumped hard. There had to be a limit to surprise attacks. My throat dried up in an instant.

“My Lord...”

The final blow. Her earnest voice licked against my ear. The weight of the feelings contained within her hoarse tone crushed my chest.

“You know, My Lord? I don’t understand much about humans. I don’t know of their weaknesses, nor do I know of the strengths which can be born of such weaknesses... Mm. I simply don’t understand. I can’t understand. I can only grasp it after someone tells me.”

I could feel Gerbera’s heart beating like a hammer through her breast. She appeared to be quite nervous. Or maybe excited was the better term. I could hear her legs skittering about.

“Fundamentally, I am a beast. So, in the end, I can only convey my words in the manner of a beast. That’s what I believe.”

“Convey...what?”

I finally managed to open my mouth, and Gerbera tightened her embrace on me.

“You see, My Lord, even now, I want to take you with my own hands.”

I unintentionally gulped. The emotions in her words forced me to do so. I was of course aware of her feelings for me. I’d known ever since our time at the arachne nest. We also had the mental path. But even without it, her usual behavior never hid it, so her feelings were quite clear. Even before that, she’d told me straight to my face that she wanted to take me. This was on an entirely different level, however.

“I want to ravish you, My Lord.” Frank, outspoken, and direct... This was Gerbera’s way of confessing. “If possible, I would like you to answer my feelings.”

Gerbera had called herself a beast. Now that I thought of it, there was a certain truth to that. However, at the same time, she was just a girl—an extraordinarily attractive one at that. Say I returned her embrace in this situation... I was certain my brakes would cease functioning altogether.

“Am I...not good enough for you?” Gerbera asked, backing off ever so slightly.

“Gerbera...”

I was entranced by the feverish look in her eyes. My sense of

reason felt like it was evaporating. My entire body was numbed from being in a dream. I could feel her anxious trembling against my skin. The sound of constant skittering tickled my ears. Her body was dangerously soft, and her sweet aroma wafted over my nose.

"If not, then show me proof. If you return my embrace, then I'll..."

Her voice was much too passionate, and it melted away any resistance I had left...



I listened to the intermittent clattering of the wheels bumping against the rough surface of the road. We proceeded down the winding path that wreathed its way around the mountain. There was a wall of rock to our right. Its exposed surface looked brittle. We'd already had to clear away two landslides today.

On our left was a rapid river at the bottom of a steep slope. The Aralia was said to be an enormous river that ran through the center of the continent. One of its branches cut through the Kitrus Mountains, which was the river we saw beneath us right now. From what I had been told, it continued to run beyond the mountain range and branched out toward our destination of Aker. It then ran through the Dark Woods to the north into Longue County.

The Dark Woods, untouched remnants of the Woodlands, were all inhabited by powerful monsters. This was the reason they remained untouched. The river ran through a region that was said to be the domain of a legendary monster called the Rage of the Earth. It was possible we would have a chance to go look once we settled down in Aker.

As I thought of such things, Lily, who was walking next to me, called out to me in a hushed voice. "Hey, Master?" She wasn't looking my way; her focus was on the others behind us by the moving manamobile. "Gerbera looks really depressed. Did something happen?"

"I guess you could say something did...or didn't?" I replied vaguely, glancing backward myself.

Rose was pulling the manamobile from the front like a rickshaw, while Gerbera trundled along beside her.

Aah, she's in pretty bad shape. It was easy to see at a glance. I scratched my cheek, unsure of what to do.

In the end, nothing had happened between the two of us. We hadn't kissed. We hadn't even embraced each other.

"If not, then show me proof. If you return my embrace, then I..."

Her passionate voice had compelled me to do so. But I couldn't. I physically couldn't... Both my arms had been tied down by her threads. When I had informed her that I couldn't do anything until she untied

me, she had been unable to endure the awkward atmosphere a moment longer. The mood was important for such matters. Once she had come back to her senses, it was difficult to continue.

Stricken by grief, Gerbera had muttered, "Why? Why am I like this...?" She had sounded almost philosophical. I couldn't help but wonder the exact same thing. She had gained such an opportunity but had completely wasted it at the pivotal moment. It really was just like her.

"I can pretty much guess what happened by looking at you two," Lily said, peeking up at me. "On the flipside, seeing how depressed she is, that means she must've gotten pretty close, huh?"

This made my heart skip, but Lily's expression remained gentle.

"I don't think I really need to tell you this, but accept her properly, okay, Master?"

Other than the specifics, Lily really did seem to know what had happened. It was more her womanly intuition than anything to do with our mental path. Or maybe Gerbera and I were just too easy to read.

"Are you fine with that, Lily?" I asked unexpectedly.

"Hmm, I get what you're trying to say, but you're kinda missing the point," Lily replied with a troubled expression. "We're not humans from your world... Actually, we're not humans at all. From our point of view, such thoughts are just insincere. To begin with, we're all your servants, but you're our only master. I have Mizushima Miho's memories, but the others probably have no idea what you're worrying about."

"But you do, right?"

"I understand, but I don't really have a sense for it. They're Mizushima Miho's values, not mine," she said in a clear tone, then shrugged. "I do know you're not the type to switch girls willy-nilly. Honestly, I was a little worried... From the looks of it though, seems things are going fine. If she got pretty close, then it's just a little further, right?"

Everything Lily had said was reasonable. If I had responded to Gerbera's feelings, even if only a little, I felt like it would've been a decisive blow. That was how attracted I was to her. Her blunt confession had enough destructive force behind it to make me self-aware of how strong my feelings were for her. Now that I knew this, I couldn't shut my eyes and pretend I didn't know.

Lily glanced at me as I let out a small groan and smiled. "Tee hee. Gerbera's a really straightforward girl, after all. She's awkward, and she doesn't take detours, but maybe that's what gets her to her destination as quickly as possible. I'm sure when it's most important, that side of her will be of great assistance to you. In a different sense

from her pure strength, I mean.” Lily then quietly muttered, “With this, I guess I can feel at ease too.”

I didn’t really understand her last statement. I turned to look at Lily’s profile. She had a transient smile on her face. I thought I had seen it before. I was reminded of that suburb outside Serrata. She had smiled like this when we were all alone in the house. I instinctively felt I couldn’t let this go. However, the situation took a turn in an unexpected direction.

“What do—”

It happened the exact instant I began asking her for clarification. My thoughts changed gears right away. Even though we were getting used to it, the mountain held many dangers. For example, there were landslides and monster attacks. We had to make sure we maintained a certain level of vigilance.

I heard a sound about ten meters in front of us. A presence suddenly appeared alongside the sound. I hadn’t realized it was there until now, meaning they had been hiding so that we wouldn’t notice. I doubted anyone would have a good reason for doing so. Thus, there was only one way to deal with it. There was no need for us to pass any instructions to each other. Lily took to the fore and positioned herself in a way to protect me. I put my hand on my sword as I quickly stepped back.

“I finally caught up to you.”

Hearing the voice in front of me, I realized my grasp of the situation was half right and half wrong. I had her ill intent right. She was blocking off my path, looking hostile. I was wrong about her hiding her presence to get close to us, though. She didn’t do anything of the sort. There was no need to. She was strong; she didn’t have to resort to such underhanded methods. She probably never even thought of doing so. She was merely so fast that it felt like she had suddenly appeared. She had come here at a speed nobody else could replicate.

“Iino...Yuna...”

The fastest member of the exploration team, the Skanda Iino Yuna, stood right before us.

Chapter 17: The Wind Blowing from Serrata ~Iino Yuna's POV~

One week after I left Fort Tilia at the head of the Imperial Knights' elite, I arrived at the Colony. I was shocked by the complete change that had occurred to our temporary settlement, but I still spent the next week retrieving survivors who had taken refuge in the nearby huts. Twenty or so days passed as we protected them on our way back.

“No way...”

A total of forty days had passed since we left for the Depths. Returning from my rescue operation, I was greeted by the unexpected sight of Fort Tilia in ruins. I was fully thrown by the inexplicable situation. Where did the defenders go? Where were my fellow students? The answers were clear just by looking at the destroyed fortress, but I couldn't accept it right away. The shock nearly brought me to my knees. I couldn't show such weakness in front of the fellow students in my care, of course. That single thought supported me, barely holding together my composure.

After taking a good look at the fortress, we managed to figure a few things out. For one, the traces of destruction pointed to a large-scale monster attack. This was evidenced by the rotting pieces of dead monsters left on the walls and floors. What kind of monster could have attacked a fortress? One section of the sturdy inner walls had even collapsed as if it had been struck by some wide-area magic. There couldn't possibly be anyone who could do such a thing aside from the cheaters of the exploration team... I couldn't suppress a shudder at the thought.

As the Skanda, I specialized in speed, so it was difficult for me to wreak destruction on this scale. Juumonji and Watanabe, on the other hand, were both perfectly capable of this. In other words, they should've been able to deal with the “enemies” who attacked the fortress.

There was still hope. I couldn't give up. Even as impatience dominated my heart, I headed north to get out of the Woodlands. We had over twenty new students under our care. Getting them to safety was our number one priority.

We managed to gather a scant amount of information from the nearby reclamation village. Fort Tilia really had been attacked by an

enormous force of monsters. Most of its garrison had been lost, and the survivors had been forced to abandon the fortress. The knights accompanying me declared this impossible, though. There was no way so many monsters would attack at once. The villagers had to be mistaken.

But there was no doubting the truth. No matter how much they denied it, they couldn't overturn the past. The one silver lining in all this darkness was that not all the fortress's people had been mercilessly killed. It seemed there were survivors who had decided the fortress could no longer be defended, so they had abandoned it and made it all the way to this reclamation village. After clearing the vicinity of monsters, they had continued north.

There was also news that some visitors had been among them. I had to meet back up with them no matter what. After verifying the safety of my fellow students, I had to figure out exactly what had happened at the fortress. The survivors were apparently headed for Serrata. I had passed through that city once before when I was on my way to Fort Tilia from Fort Ebenus.

After I exited the Woodlands, I judged that it was safe and left my fellow students in the care of the Imperial Knights. With a translation runestone clasped in my hand, I set off for Serrata on my own. Even as I suppressed my speed, I was faster than a chain of trained horses that alternated as each got tired. I reached Serrata in two days and requested a meeting with its feudal lord, Count Lorenz. Fortunately, the lieutenant of the Imperial Knights that I had gone into the Woodlands with was the count's relative. Thanks to their letter of recommendation, I was let through to see Count Lorenz right away.

The interior of Fort Serrata was much more ostentatious than Tilia or Ebenus. I was shown into a luxurious room where two people awaited me. The first was a man wearing a military uniform. His muscular body showed no signs of excess fat, indicating how strictly he disciplined himself. He had evenly cut short blond hair, and his expression looked rather high strung and serious.

The other was a quirky man with brown hair. He was the thinner of the two, but he was also visibly muscular. He wore decorated armor, but his easy-going expression gave him the elegance of a minstrel rather than that of a knight.

"Who are you two?" I asked with a puzzled look.

According to the lieutenant, the head of House Lorenz was a man whose abundance radiated from his body. In other words, he was probably stout and fat. Neither of the men before me matched this description.

"A pleasure to meet you, madam. My name is Louis Bard," the larger man said with a bow. "I serve the head of House Maclairin,

Lord Glantri Maclaurin, and have been entrusted with a portion of the margraviate's army. And this is..."

"I have been given charge of the Holy Order's Fourth Company. The name is Travis Mortimer. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Yuna," the other man said as he gently bowed.

His refined and pompous gestures reminded me of a Hollywood actor. It was easy to guess that he was popular with women. However, that wasn't the part I was focused on.

"Louis and Travis, right? Why is the subordinate of one of the southern Empire's grand houses and an officer of the Holy Order together all the way out here?"

I had heard about Margrave Maclaurin before from the lieutenant. He was a noble of the southern region said to be a bold man who led his regional army in the suppression of monsters despite his high status. Why would the subordinate of such a person be in Lorenz County?

Louis faced my suspicious gaze head-on and gave me his answer. "My lord is one of those entrusted with the stability of the southern Empire. Thus, he's greatly concerned for the calamity which has befallen Fort Tilia. This has to do with the safety of our hallowed saviors, after all. There are facets of this that cannot be handled by a count. As such, he took action of his own accord, and Lord Lorenz has happily accepted his offer."

Louis then looked to the knight at his side and continued. "Sir Mortimer was on his way to Fort Tilia to welcome the saviors who have come to our world. On his long journey from the imperial capital through the margraviate, news of Fort Tilia's fall reached his ears, and he has offered my lord his hand in dealing with these matters."

He then returned his gaze to me. "As for me, I am staying in Serrata as my lord's representative and have been entrusted with the care of the soldiers who escaped Fort Tilia."

"Oh! Does that include my comrades?!"

I couldn't suppress my excitement. It had already been more than ten days since I'd seen Fort Tilia's disastrous state. I had been feeling impatient the entire time. I was finally able to get information regarding the safety of the students.

"Do you know the details of the attack on Fort Tilia?!" I asked in a frenzy. "Please tell me! What exactly happened there? Where are the other students?!"

"Please calm down, madam," Louis said, holding me back with both hands as I drew closer. "I will tell you everything I know. Please give me the time to do so."

"O-Okay..."

I calmed my soaring spirits and listened.

◆ ◆ ◆
“No way. That can’t be...”

I was speechless. According to Louis, a group of students with evil intentions had brought Fort Tilia to ruin.

“I can’t believe it...”

“I’m very sorry to say that it’s the truth,” Louis replied in a heavy tone. “Fort Tilia suffered an attack at the hands of someone who has the power to manipulate monsters. There are several testimonies backing this, and judging from the situation, there’s no denying it.”

I had seen the traces of destruction at the abandoned fortress for myself. I hadn’t had the time to thoroughly investigate them, but there were many signs that pointed to a horde of monsters. With the exception of things like a school of tripdrills, such a large-scale movement pretty much never happened throughout all of this world’s history. That was why the Imperial Knights who had accompanied me doubted their eyes.

According to them, the last time such a thing had happened was several centuries ago, when a savior led a grand campaign into the Abyss. If such a thing were more common, they wouldn’t have spent so much effort constructing such a large fortress. No matter how sturdy they built the walls, repeated attacks of that scale couldn’t be kept at bay. It wouldn’t be worth it if the fortress fell immediately after completion.

And now, such a rare occurrence had happened while we were at the fortress by utter coincidence? That was out of the question. Even I could see that someone who was in the fortress at the time had done this. This applied doubly so when considering the abilities we possessed. It was definitely possible.

“Unforgivable...”

I gritted my teeth. Louis had told me how many people had died. The two companions I had journeyed with through the Woodlands, Juumonji and Watanabe, had both been killed. The majority of the other students I was meant to protect had also died. Even many of the fortress’s people who had treated us so kindly had lost their lives.

The damage was far too excessive. There was no recovering from it. The thought of those people dying in fear and regret pained my heart. I felt a hair-raising discomfort toward the culprit along with an irrepressible sense of anger.

“I definitely, *definitely* won’t let them get away!”

I would catch them and make them realize exactly what it was that they had done. That was the least I could do for the victims.

“Yes. It was an unforgivable act,” Louis said, nodding in agreement. “Many lives were lost to the villainous power of

manipulating monsters. We cannot leave such an evil at large.”

He put his strength into his fingers, interlacing them over his knees. That gesture showed an unbearable sense of righteous indignation, as if his bones and muscles were audibly creaking.

“Evil must be destroyed. Justice must be enforced. Even if I am to die miserably on the battlefield, there are evils which simply cannot be neglected. I have no intention of forgiving those who manipulate monsters or those who conspire with them.”

The pressure I felt from this man, who was supposed to be physically weaker than me, compelled me to hold my breath. Every single word from his mouth was filled with a terrifyingly heavy emotion. Still, I could sympathize with him in this regard. I was overawed, but not displeased.

“Madam, I would like to ask you to lend us your strength so that we may rid the world of this evil.”

“With pleasure,” I answered with a reassuring nod.

I then had Louis tell me everything he knew. Having said that, there wasn’t all that much to tell. The information was a mess. Pretty much nobody knew all the details, so wild rumors were spreading about irresponsibly.

“Of all things, there are those saying your fellow exploration team member Juumonji is one of the culprits who attacked Fort Tilia.”

“That can’t be!”

“I do not believe in such drivel, of course. They are nothing but groundless rumors.”

It was a relief to hear that, but it did prove how severely distorted the information at hand had become.

“Our society, which requires us to take up arms in a continuous struggle against monsters, is very fragile. The smallest event is likely to sunder our hearts long before breaking our blades. The effect is even greater when it is related to the hallowed saviors who serve as our moral pillars. We cannot allow such thoughtless information to flow. My lord has ordered me to shelter the surviving soldiers from Fort Tilia while also keeping unwanted information from spreading.”

The loss of an important base in Fort Tilia. The death of several visitors from afar. The fact that a group of visitors were behind the attack. Each piece of news was too sensational and would have too large an effect on the populace. Furthermore, there were groundless rumors that couldn’t reach the light of day. Margrave Maclaurin’s orders to Louis were appropriate.

The margrave himself had already left Serrata. The only people who supposedly knew all the details of the events were members of the Alliance Knights. They had left together with the margrave. Louis had been leading the margraviate’s army to Serrata, while his lord had

gone ahead of him with the cavalry. By the time he caught up, the margrave had given his orders and had immediately left, so Louis didn't even get the chance to meet the Alliance Knights.

"Very well. So if I go see Margrave Maclaurin, I should be able to learn more... Oh, but will I be able to meet him even if I catch up?"

He was a noble. I had the referral of Count Lorenz's relative, the lieutenant of the Imperial Knights that I had gone into the Woodlands with, so I had been able to meet with Count Lorenz. But it wasn't definite that I could meet a margrave without any connections.

"It should be fine. My lord is sure to meet any savior who visits him," Louis said.

I cocked my head at this. "What kind of person is he?"

"Let's see..." Louis sank into thought for a short while before answering. "To sum him up briefly, he's a man with a strong sense of justice. He has dedicated much of his life to fighting the evil known as monsters. His decisiveness in taking action has made him many political enemies and the target of groundless slander from those who do not understand him. Nevertheless, he does not allow his conviction to falter."

I could hear the respect that Louis had for this man through the gravity of his voice.

"He is also a man of deep compassion. In truth, I come from a village that suffered devastating damage from a monster attack."

"Huh? Is that so...?" I didn't know what to say to his sudden confession.

Louis smiled ever so slightly at my vague response. "If Lord Maclaurin had arrived only a moment later with his army, I wouldn't be alive. Not only that, he granted an orphan like me, who had nowhere to go, a job dealing with his army's miscellaneous affairs."

Meaning Louis owed this man his life. I could understand why I'd heard such respect in his voice now.

"During a widespread devastation of crops about ten years ago, he took many steps and used his own personal funds to prevent starvation. I still didn't possess much of a rank at the time, but I pride myself greatly for working as part of the army in his name back then."

I let out a sigh of relief. Even though this was coming from his subordinate, it seemed like this Margrave Maclaurin was a good man.

"Given his nature, if a savior who wishes to strike down evil were to seek an audience with him, then I am sure he would accept. However..." Louis paused as he knit his brows. "My lord left the city ten days ago. It would take time to catch up with him. Moreover, by the time I arrived, he was already leaving. While I do know he is headed for the imperial capital, I do not know what route he is using."

I groaned. If he left ten days ago, I could catch up in two or three

days, but without knowing the route he was using, I had to check all of them. It wasn't entirely impossible, but it would take some time.

"What would you like to do? If need be, I could address a letter to Lord Maclaurin for you."

"No... It's fine."

I waved my hand and turned down his offer. It was important to hear more about the attack on Fort Tilia from the margrave, but I had to chase after the culprit behind the attack right away. The longer I waited to track the fleeing suspect, the harder it would get. I couldn't waste any time.

"Very well. In that case, please come visit me again when you return to Serrata. If I come across any new information, I shall pass it on to you."

"Thank you very much."

Reassured by the existence of an ally who thought like I did, I left Serrata behind. I'd obtained the information I needed already, and I was now acquainted with someone who could help me. It had been a worthwhile meeting.

There was just one tiny thorn pricking at my heart. It concerned the officer of the Holy Order, Travis. The entire time I was speaking with Louis, he had kept silent and watched us with a smile. His expression was awfully smug for a man of gentle manners. However, I felt like there was more to it...

Let's not... There's no point in worrying about that. Even if Travis had been secretly making fun of the immature sense of justice Louis and I possessed, it didn't change what had to be done. I had to crush evil and save the weak. That was all.

I left Serrata and ran all the way to Fort Ebenus. No matter what I did, first I had to relay all necessary information to the exploration team's leader, Nakajima Kojirou. Louis had been entrusted with sheltering Fort Tilia's surviving soldiers while also preventing the spread of irresponsible information. Fearing anything would leak out, Louis refused to use the long-range communication device in Fort Serrata to convey information to Fort Ebenus. If I spoke directly with our leader, however, there was no need to worry about this.

After meeting with Nakajima, I went right back to Serrata, then headed south. There were many uncertain details, but we knew for sure that a cheater who manipulated monsters had attacked Fort Tilia.

There were two confirmed reports regarding this crucial point. The first was Kudou Riku. I honestly didn't remember his face, but I did recall there was a first-year student among the home team members at Fort Tilia. The other was Majima Takahiro, a second-year student just like me.

There were no clues regarding Kudou's current whereabouts. He

was thought to be hiding in the Woodlands, but it was possible he had snuck his way into human society as well. In contrast, it was known that Majima Takahiro had been staying in a suburb near Serrata just recently.

He had audaciously left Fort Tilia with the survivors. After that, Majima Takahiro went into hiding. According to Louis, it was highly likely he was headed to Aker, one of the Five Northern Kingdoms. Escaping from the Empire, which prided itself on military strength, and taking refuge in a small country to wait for things to cool down was truly an understandable choice.

Louis had already made preparations to cover the safe route through Longue County to the west. As such, I left that to him and headed south from Serrata to investigate the old mountain path through the Kitrus Mountains.

It was apparently a long-forgotten road that wasn't normally used, but with the cheats of a visitor, it wasn't all that difficult to force one's way through. It was of course possible he wasn't going this way, but that was the nature of dividing work. As the Skanda, I was pretty much the only one who could catch up to someone after such a late start like this. Considering the danger of the path itself, nobody else was suitable for the job. If I was to be a little greedy, I would've liked the ability to trace footprints...

"If only Todo were here."

I recalled my best friend who I had always teamed up with until I left with the expeditionary force. She had stayed behind in the Colony, and I wasn't able to reunite with her during my rescue activities. She was about as strong as I was, though, so she was probably fine so long as she didn't encounter something excessively bad out there. If she were with me, she'd be able to put her abilities on full display.

I couldn't do anything about someone who wasn't here, however. So I hurried with my chase and continued gathering information from the villages on the way. Fortunately, I managed to find someone who had spotted a man who looked like Majima Takahiro. All I had to do now was catch up. I was well aware of the emotion burning hotter and hotter within my heart.

Majima Takahiro.

I had spoken with him at Fort Tilia. He honestly didn't leave much of an impression. He was a boy who seemed serious and sincere. That was about all I thought of him. However, paired with the girl Mizushima Miho, the two of them left quite an impression.

I knew Mizushima Miho before coming to this world. I was only aware of her after arriving at Fort Ebenus, though. A boy had made it through the Woodlands all on his own to bring us news of the

Colony's destruction. He was Mizushima Miho's childhood friend who was one year younger than us, Takaya Jun.

Due to his long forced march, Takaya's sturdy warrior body and heart had been in tatters. Nevertheless, he had managed to reach Fort Ebenus to plead with us to save his precious childhood friend. At the time, I had clasped his hand, told him to leave it to me, and headed for Fort Tilia. That was why I had felt both relief and a little anger when I saw Mizushima Miho with Majima Takahiro.

What's with that? Seriously? What about Takaya? I had thought to myself. But I did realize that their love triangle was none of my business. I already knew that Mizushima Miho thought of Takaya as nothing more than her childhood friend. That was why I had stopped at telling them that Takaya was alive.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a little mean in doing so. However, right away, I knew it didn't matter. The two of them had suited each other so well. I was sure they had overcome a great ordeal hand in hand. There had been an air about them as if it were perfectly natural for the other to be there. Nothing I could do would cause that to crumble.

As a girl, I had found this quite wonderful...and I couldn't forgive myself now for thinking so. It was all a lie. The one next to Majima Takahiro wasn't Mizushima Miho. It was a villainous monster who only imitated her outer appearance.

A mimic slime. It was said to be a special monster who could mimic everything about whatever it ate. The fact that such a monster took Mizushima Miho's shape meant that Majima Takahiro had killed her, and then...

I had to be sure of it. I had to be sure whether such an inhuman act had happened. If Majima Takahiro was in fact a cruel murderer, I had to catch him even if it meant beating him down. That was why I possessed power as the Skanda, after all.

With that thought in my heart, I ran through the mountain road...and spotted him.

"I finally caught up to you."

He was on a thin mountain path. I used my prided leg strength to run across a practically vertical cliff face and cut him off.

"Tino...Yuna..." Majima Takahiro muttered as his eyes shot open.

Mizushima Miho—the monster mimicking her form—stepped forward as if to protect him. The girl behind him wearing a mask appeared to be a puppet-type monster, judging by her limbs. There was also a beautiful arachne with the lower body of a spider, and a puffed-up baby blowfox riding on her head. A creeper-type monster stretched out of the back of Majima Takahiro's left hand like a snake.

He was also accompanied by a schoolgirl I didn't know and two

elves who appeared to be locals. None of them mattered to me right now. They were completely ignorable. The important thing here was that Majima Takahiro's ability to manipulate monsters was in fact real. Having said that, it didn't mean he was necessarily evil.

"I'll ask just one thing," I said. I had to confirm this for the last time. "Majima. Did you feed Mizushima to the monster you're manipulating?"

Majima Takahiro's face stiffened. In that instant, I decided he was definitely my enemy.



Chapter 18: The Sprinting Girl

“Majima. Did you feed Mizushima to the monster you’re manipulating?”

Her words felt like a direct impact to my heart. I knew someday, somewhere, someone would ask this question. I had thought of this before. I knew I would be disparaged, disdained, and denounced for it. Such a reaction would be perfectly natural. However, Iino Yuna’s arrival was all too sudden, and I didn’t have time to prepare myself. I didn’t even have time to consider what the best thing to do was. My mind couldn’t come up with any way to deceive her. As a result, my reaction became an answer of its own.

“Looks like I’m right.”

Iino obviously found fault with how I stood there gulping, because her eyes glinted with the sharpness of naked steel.

“You villain.”

I broke into a cold sweat. I wanted to ask why she was here and why she was chasing me, but my mouth had frozen shut. Fear welled up within me to the point where I couldn’t even breathe. All the blood drained from my face, and my extremities turned numb with a chill. The animosity she bore me was gripping my heart.

This girl before me was overwhelming. Even though she had yet to draw the sword at her waist, the core of my being was screaming at the danger closing in on me. Perhaps this was how a mouse felt when a roaring lion pinned it down.

That such a comparison came to mind emphasized the gap between us. I could instinctually sense that. Though I could fight a little now, it wasn’t nearly enough to escape from her. She was one of the few who had earned a nickname within the exploration team. Considering how Juumonji Tatsuya hadn’t had one, her strength was unfathomable.

“My Lord!”

Naturally, my servants weren’t going to quietly watch this crisis unfold. They all went into a frenzy to remove the danger before me. They weren’t overreacting either. Someone had shown up out of nowhere and suddenly called out their master with clearly hostile intent. Considering the gulf between our strength, it was as if someone had suddenly pointed a machine gun at me.

Nobody had time to think. I could be Swiss cheese in the next

second, after all. That was why their counterattack was practically reflexive.

“Shaaah!”

The first to attack Iino was the strongest of my servants, the Great White Spider. Leaving the manamobile behind, she charged in with explosive force. She used her specialty thrust, rode the momentum of her charge, and plunged her leg right into Iino’s throat.

At least, that was what it had looked like. I knew somewhere within me that it wouldn’t end so easily. Iino was way too fast. It had only *looked* like she’d been struck. Iino had moved right before Gerbera could make contact. Her slender body reached top speed in an instant.

“Haaa!”

Iino leaned to the side, dodging the spider leg and cutting it off with her sword. I didn’t even see her draw it. She then pivoted with her left foot to deliver a roundhouse kick directly to the back of Gerbera’s head.

“Gah?!”

Struck from behind in the middle of her charge, Gerbera couldn’t stop her momentum. She crashed into the ground, flying past Iino.

“Are you resisting?” Iino asked. “Well, I don’t really care. That just means I have to knock you down.”

I had plenty I wanted to say, but I didn’t have the chance to slip in a single word. Iino charged right at me. I had seen her fight once before. Her movements had been absurdly fast. They had surpassed my cognition at the time. However, I could use mana better than I could back then. This meant I could also strengthen my body better than before. Thanks to that, I could see the Skanda’s movements now...but that was all I could do.

I saw her dash toward me. I saw her swing her fist, her sword still clenched in her hand. She even surpassed Lily, who couldn’t even cut in between us.

A sudden shock ran through my body, and I went flying backward. I lost consciousness for a moment.

“M-Master!”

“Senpai!”

I could hear Rose and Katou right next to me. There was a hard sensation against my back. Rose had evidently caught me. Something viscous came dribbling out of my nose. That was when I first realized I had been punched right in the face.

“Huh? That should’ve been enough to knock out a knight. You’re strangely sturdy, huh?” Iino said curiously. “Well, whatever. If that’s not enough, I just have to hit you harder. If need be, I can keep hitting you all day.”

“Iino, you...”

I couldn't say anything else. My brain was shaking. I couldn't think straight. Nevertheless, I clenched my teeth and looked up as Lily charged in.

“Ugh! Hnngh...”

“Oh, right. Let me tell you now. It's useless no matter how hard you try, okay?”

Iino was casually holding Lily's black spear with her left hand—she'd stopped it mid-thrust. Lily was gripping it so tightly that her hands were trembling. She was putting all of her strength into it, but the tip wouldn't budge.

“I specialize in speed, so I only have average physical strength among the exploration team...but I'm still a cheater.”

She kept her gaze fixed on me the entire time. At a glance, Iino's fighting style focused entirely on speed. But that didn't mean she was lacking in strength. Actually, one could say she was weak, but only when compared to her overwhelming leg power. Her standards were out of whack to begin with.

“Hwah?!”

Iino pulled on the spear and yanked Lily forward, breaking her balance. She sidestepped Lily as she tumbled forward. Then Iino casually tossed the spear aside before turning back my way.

I was at my wit's end. At this rate, Iino would trample us before we could do a single thing. I had to do something...anything. Although I was still disoriented, I wiped the blood from my nose and glared at Iino.

“Hmm, so you're not giving up?” Iino said, narrowing her gaze.

“Of course not.”

I drew my sword with my right hand and held out my left. My head was still shaking, and I couldn't think straight, but I had no other choice. I was being attacked, so I had to retaliate. I couldn't stand here and let her kill me for god knows what reason.

“Massss—ter!”

“Grawr!”

Asarina vigorously lunged from my hand while Ayame ran up to my feet and spat out a fireball to support her.

“Out of the way.”

Her slender blade cut down both the fireball and Asarina. That didn't matter. My true aim came after that.

“Do it!”

Rose ran past me and attacked Iino from the front. She swung her bardiche with both hands to try and bisect Iino at the waist. In the same moment, Gerbera matched her timing and attacked Iino from the rear.

Regardless of whether she tried to catch Rose's attack or dodge it, we were aiming for the opening created when she did so. To be doubly sure, Lily slammed both her hands against the ground, as if standing up would be a waste of time, and kicked her heel up at Iino as she went into a handstand.

These were my servants. Any one of them would've been lethal against an average opponent. But the moment I thought this would settle things...I gasped at the spectacle before me.

Lily's attack was the first to reach. Iino easily caught Lily's heel with her palm.

"Hwah?!"

Iino casually tossed Lily's outstretched body aside. Having removed Lily with only a minimum amount of effort, Iino calmly dealt with Rose and Gerbera's attacks. She took a single forceful step. It looked like she was exposing herself to Rose's blade, but she leaned to the side and avoided the blow. At the same time, she twisted her body and unleashed her fist.

"Gyah?!"

She delivered a terrifying body blow to Rose's side. The sound of wood creaking and cracking apart rang out as Rose's body slammed into the cliffside. The impact sent clumps of dirt crumbling down the tattered cliff, which seemed liable to collapse any second. Released from its wielder's hands, the bardiche plunged itself into the ground. Iino had defeated Rose in the blink of an eye.

Just then, Gerbera's attack from behind came in. This had been our true intent. It was supposed to be an unavoidable assault. However, because Iino had taken a step forward when intercepting Rose, what was supposed to be a tightly linked chain of blows was off by one beat. In the time it took Gerbera to take that single extra step, the Skanda had turned around and faced her with lightning speed.

"Shaaah!"

Gerbera had lost her advantage, but she wasn't one to hesitate over that. Because Iino had just turned around, her defensive stance wasn't perfect. As such, there was no other choice but to push in. The talons at the end of Gerbera's legs closed in to tear Iino apart. Iino stayed standing where she was and responded with the slender sword in her hand.

"Haaah!"

Iino's expression tensed, and she let out a yell full of fighting spirit. There was a power in her eyes that displayed the dazzling fire burning in her chest. The way she gallantly fought with the cold, sharp blade in her delicate hand...truly shone with a brilliance suitable of a savior.

From my perspective, however, it was a nightmarish sight.

Gerbera was strong. Her eight legs were each like remarkable spears. She could freely wield her specialty threads to bind her enemy. She was strong enough in battle to doggedly hound Juumonji. Yet she couldn't keep up with Iino at all.

"Yaaa!"

We were truly in the realm of the Skanda's speed. The scene before me explained what it meant for a cheater to earn a nickname from their peers. Gerbera's expression stiffened at the countless silver flashes from Iino's right hand.

My eyes could just barely see their exchange of offense and defense. The one thing I could tell was that Iino parried every single one of Gerbera's thrusts, while the tip of her silver blade carved Gerbera's hair-covered carapace in the blink of an eye.

"You're pretty good. But I won't lose to some monster being manipulated by a villain!"

"You brazen little...!"

Gerbera's tough white legs were becoming visibly tattered from the countless cuts. It was clear things were turning for the worst.

"Dammit!"

I launched Asarina at Iino's flank to try and support Gerbera, but Iino cut down the parasite creeper in the spare moments she had dealing with Gerbera. I couldn't even buy a single second. As that went on, one, then two spider legs fell to the ground.

"Agh... Ugh..."

Within ten seconds, Gerbera lost her balance. Iino had cut off two legs on her left and one on the right, so Gerbera could no longer keep up her vicious stream of offense and defense.

"It's over," Iino said, turning my way.

"Not yet!"

Iino's eyes widened ever so slightly. She thought Gerbera was toppling over, but the spider resolutely grasped at Iino even as she fell.

"I shan't let you touch my lord!"

Gerbera had once fought Juumonji head-on. She couldn't match Iino in speed, but her physical strength could possibly compete with the Skanda.

"Ooooh!"

Gerbera's expression was desperate, like she was saying this was her last chance. But even that was no match for the Skanda's speed. Iino let out a quiet yelp and slipped past Gerbera as if by magic. Gerbera's powerful arms caught nothing but empty air.

"Guargh?!"

She turned around in a panic and met Iino's uppercut. It was a clean hit. Gerbera's body drew a large arc in the air. The giant white

spider, now missing several legs, came crashing down behind Shiran and Kei, where she slammed into the manamobile and finally came to a stop.

“Gerbera!” Katou screamed as she ran over to her.

Iino could apparently tell right away that Katou posed no threat. She only gave her a single glance before she put her hand to her chest and let out a sigh.

“That one startled me a bit...”

That was all Gerbera’s all-or-nothing attack had amounted to. I was shocked by how monstrous Iino was. Gerbera groaned from the many wounds she had suffered. Lily had launched two attacks but couldn’t do anything at all. Rose staggered as her body creaked from the cracks running through it.

We were in no position to retaliate. At this rate, we would be wiped out. Something... There had to be something we could do, some way of getting through this situation. I desperately got my thoughts in motion, but there was no such convenient—

“Hm...?”

Maybe my brain had started recovering from the blow I took. As I desperately fumbled for a way to get through this, a certain detail suddenly caught my attention. Something felt out of place here. I couldn’t tell exactly what it was, though. I didn’t have time to delve into it any further.

“Actually, just now, it was as if it was seriously...” Iino muttered to herself, but she swallowed her next words.

“Yaaaah!”

Lily was there before her, charging in with nothing but her hands.

Chapter 19: How to Defeat a Hero

“Yaaaah!”

Lily charged barehanded at Iino, though Iino was far beyond the combined efforts of all my servants. She didn’t have her favorite black spear in hand. Iino had snatched it away during her previous attack, and she hadn’t had the opportunity to retrieve it.

“What can you do without a weapon?” Iino asked in astonishment.

She wasn’t looking at Lily. She was looking at me... For some reason, Iino only ever talked to me this entire time. Those words were meant for Lily, but were instead directed at me. After seeing this multiple times now, I finally realized what I had found strange. It was like Iino wasn’t acknowledging the girls’ individuality. She didn’t acknowledge that monsters could act independently.

Now that I thought of it, when Iino faced off against Gerbera, she’d yelled, “I won’t lose to some monster being manipulated by a villain.” The ability to manipulate monsters... I recalled the definitive difference between Kudou and myself. Was this truly just a coincidence? Why was Iino attacking us in the first place?

She had overwhelmed us so completely, with no room for debate, that I hadn’t really had time to consider it. Perhaps she was greatly misunderstanding something.

“Ah?!”

Before I could put my doubts into words, I saw Iino thrust her foot into Lily’s stomach. With no weapon in hand, Lily had no choice but to defenselessly take the blow to her gut. However, it was Lily who flashed a smile, while Iino looked slightly shocked.

“What the? What’s this feeling...?”

Iino’s foot sank deep into Lily’s belly. It was as if Lily’s innards were utterly smashed, but that wasn’t what happened. I suddenly understood what Lily’s goal was. She had partially undone her mimicry to turn a portion of her body back into a slime. The gelatinous substance was both lithe and tenacious. It could absorb a simple blow.

“Got you.”

Using the momentary opening from Iino’s shock, Lily grabbed Iino’s leg. She gathered her mana on the spot. A green glyph took shape. It was grade 3 wind magic. Its effective range was narrow, but

that only made it more dense as an attack.

The magic activated, enveloping both Iino and Lily. Lily was controlling it as best she could to avoid hitting herself, but she couldn't avoid her own magic entirely. This attack risked her own life. There was no way it wouldn't damage Iino.

Or so I thought. Iino bent her knees slightly. Before I could even think "no way," she'd already taken action. Her leg sprang up, and she kicked off the ground with the jumping power of the Skanda. She took off with explosive force.

"Y-You're kidding me?!" Lily screamed as both her legs came off the ground.

There was nothing left to suppress the Skanda's speed anymore. Iino withdrew from the range of Lily's magic in a flash. Lily's resolute gamble had torn up nothing but the air.

"You sure are cruel, Majima," Iino said to me as she shook Lily off her leg. "Even if they're just your convenient playthings, using your monsters as sacrificial pawns is just..."

I could see a burning rage deep within her eyes. Seeing her like this, I was sure she was misunderstanding something here.

"Iino Yuna!"

Just then, a sharp voice cut in between our stare-down. Even Iino, who looked like she was ready to lunge in and punch me at any second, raised a brow. She then turned to the owner of the voice. It was a perfectly normal reaction, but this was the first time she gave us a moment to breathe since she'd appeared before us.

"Ummm, you're..."

"I serve as the lieutenant of the Third Company of the Alliance Knights. My name is Shiran."

"Oh, right. Lieutenant Shiran. We spoke once before, if I recall."

Her reaction was clearly different from when she was dealing with Lily and the other girls. Her expression was still somewhat cold, but at the very least, Iino would converse with Shiran. Put another way, she wholly disregarded anything the others said, meaning this entire disaster she brought with her was all born from her misunderstanding.

"Why have you suddenly attacked us? I would hear of your intentions."

Shiran spoke vehemently, as if she was forcing her way between us. She couldn't hide the criticism in her tone. Her confident expression was a little stiff, probably because she understood how bad this situation was. Even if she lent her support, the outcome couldn't be overturned. That was how overwhelming the difference was between Iino and us.

"I want to ask why you're traveling with Majima Takahiro," Iino replied in a thorny voice. "He's the one who manipulated monsters

into attacking Fort Tilia, you know?”

Shiran's eye shot open, while I narrowed mine and knit my brows. I knew my suspicions were right now. Not that I could be happy about it. But with this, I got the gist of the situation. About two months ago, Iino had left Fort Tilia to head into the Depths. If all went to plan, she was to return after one month, meaning she would've seen the now-ruined Fort Tilia. She should've gotten a decent idea of what had happened based on that alone.

However, that was nothing more than an idea. She didn't fully understand the events that had transpired. Hearsay lacked details, and it was possible that errors got included in any information she'd heard. Still, this was misinformation to a cruel degree.

I didn't know what had happened, but Iino was under the impression that I was the culprit behind the attack. The reason she ignored everything Lily and the other girls were saying was because she thought they were nothing more than manipulated monsters. This was certainly a tremendous misunderstanding. The problem was that it was a major pain to fix a misunderstanding of this size.

“Wha—?! Y-You've got it wrong, Yuna,” Shiran said, her expression changing entirely.

“What have I gotten wrong?” Iino replied, her gaze strong.

“The monster tamer who attacked Fort Tilia was Kudou Riku, not Takahiro.”

“I heard about Kudou...”

“S-So that makes things easy! Takahiro had nothing to do with the attack. At any rate, it was Takahiro who defeated Fort Tilia's assailant, Juumonji Tatsuya, and routed the monster tamer Kudou Riku, who was working behind the scenes!”

It was all true. Shiran didn't tell a single lie. But Iino shook her head.

“I didn't hear anything about that.”

“Th-That can't be...!”

From Iino's perspective, what she'd heard before and what Shiran was telling her now were both hearsay from strangers. As such, it was a matter of who she trusted more. Shiran was accompanying me, so it wasn't strange Iino doubted her claims.

“Besides, Juumonji attacked the fortress?” Iino's gaze grew sharper. “I heard there were people out there spreading such stupid rumors. Looks like it's true.”

Juumonji was a member of the first expeditionary force and Iino's companion as they traveled through the Woodlands. It was difficult for her to believe he was a culprit. Furthermore, Iino had heard about these “stupid rumors” beforehand. She wasn't going to pay any attention to such claims no matter who told her of them now. It would

only worsen her impression of us.

Iino knew I had fed Mizushima Miho to Lily. She might even believe I was the one who had killed her. I didn't do anything of the sort, of course, but I didn't have any evidence to prove otherwise. Even if I did manage to prove my innocence somehow, it didn't change the fact that I had Lily eat her corpse.

Even if it was necessary for my own survival, it wasn't a valid excuse. Majima Takahiro was evil, so it made sense he would attack Fort Tilia. So long as she believed that, Iino wouldn't back down.

It was impossible to defeat the Skanda in a direct confrontation. Even though Shiran was a third party, her words couldn't reach Iino. It was hopeless. We were blocked off from every direction. If I were alone, I'd simply resign myself here.

"Hey, can you give yourself up already?" Iino averted her gaze from Shiran and spoke to me, sounding fed up. "You can already tell you can't win, right?"

Iino glanced to the side where Lily was accumulating her mana.

"Lily..." I muttered.

There was a strength in her expression that differed from Iino's. It was a sign of her tenacious will. Lily had yet to give up. I could tell through our mental path that all the others felt the same. As such—even if that weren't the case—I couldn't afford to give up either. Yet as I made my resolve, something completely unexpected happened.

"Waaaah!"

Someone yelled. It wasn't me. It wasn't Lily, or Gerbera, or Rose.

"K-Katou?!" I cried.

The one who yelled in self-abandonment and ran right past me was the girl who was supposed to be totally powerless. She ran down the mountain path that clung to the cliffside, holding a knife in a reverse grip. Her strides were slow and uneven. It was so unexpected that everybody was late to react, but the Skanda was still the fastest to move.



“Urk.”

Iino restrained Katou in an instant.

“What are you trying to do? From what I can tell, you haven’t awakened to your cheat or anything...”

Katou’s face twisted in pain. Iino took a closer look at her and suddenly frowned.

“Huh? Are you...Katou Mana?”

“You...know me...? Agh.”

Katou let out a stifled groan as Iino twisted her hand behind her back, forcing her to drop Rose’s specially made knife. Iino stopped the rest of us with her gaze as we nearly rushed over to Katou on reflex.

“I heard from Takaya. Your stature is similar to what he described.”

“Oh. Now that you mention it, Takaya did meet back up with the expeditionary force, didn’t he?”

“This is baffling... From what Takaya told me, you’re Mizushima’s junior and got along with her very well. So why are you with Majima? He made his monster eat Mizushima.”

“Who knows? Isn’t it because my standards for evaluation are different from yours?”

Though her expression stiffened in pain, Katou responded rather flippantly. I couldn’t understand her, in an entirely different way from Iino.

“Iino, I believe what you’re saying is right,” Katou continued. She wasn’t acting like a girl driven to the end of her rope. “What Majima-senpai did is wrong. That’s why he’s a villain... I get it. You must be very virtuous to say such a thing. What’s more, you’re overflowing with a sense of justice. Even if we weren’t treated as saviors here, I’m sure you would’ve acted exactly the same. People like you truly might be real heroes.”

“What are you trying to—”

“But even so, Majima-senpai was the one who saved me. Not you.” Iino faltered as Katou strengthened her glare. “From my perspective, you’re the evil one for hurting him.”

“I-I’m...evil...?”

“Yes. It doesn’t matter to me whether you’re virtuous... Oh, maybe it does. I guess you could say it’s rather convenient for me.”

Her choice of words was strange. Iino looked at her, wondering what she meant.

“Iino, you’ve been holding back all this time, right?”

“Huh?”

Katou continued, ignoring my astonished gasp. “I mean, if you were so inclined, you could’ve decapitated everyone by now, right?”

What's she saying? I thought. But now that she mentioned it, despite the overwhelming gulf between us, nobody had died yet. The only one Iino had swung her sword at was Gerbera, and even then, she had only cut off her legs.

"Even though you know they're monsters, do you refrain from using your sword when they look like humans? With Majima-senpai too. You should've been able to cut him down instead of just punching him."

"Wh-What are you saying?! He'd die!" Iino replied in a startled tone.

I was taken aback by the difference in cognition. After giving it some thought, however, Iino had only ever said that she was going to "beat me down." All she had actually done to me was punch me in the face. She had done so with her swordhand, but she didn't cut me. I had been desperate, thinking I would get killed, while Iino was fighting with no intent to do so. I'd thought that the situation before me was hopeless, but that wasn't how Katou had interpreted it.

"You're right. It'd be bad if he died, huh? You really are a true hero. I'm glad you are. Truly glad."

A cold sweat ran down Katou's face as she endured the pain and forced a self-assured smile.

"Please don't forget," she continued. "Just as you said, I'm no more than a normal human. I have no strength. I can't fight. I have no means of surviving if something happens to me. I'm not opposed to taking advantage of others' weaknesses either. I'm a weak human, after all."

"What are you—" Iino began to say, when she suddenly raised her head.

"Hee hee... Hee hee hee. Katou, I truly do find you to be the most terrifying of all."

Iino's gaze was fixed on Gerbera, who had been defeated quite spectacularly moments ago. Gerbera had apparently managed to pull herself together while Katou bought time.

"I sincerely doubt your sanity," Gerbera said to Katou.

"How mean. I told you before, didn't I? I'm actually quite the scaredy-cat."

"That's precisely why you are terrifying."

Gerbera dug what talons she had left into the ground. She held up the manamobile she'd crashed into with one hand.

Iino looked somewhat exasperated at her. "That's quite crude, isn't it?"

"Don't be like that. This manner of weapon happens to suit me best, just so you know."

Gerbera was wielding the vehicle like a club. This should've put a

fair amount of stress on the frame, but Rose had customized this manamobile. Even though it creaked, it didn't break apart. It could be used as a blunt weapon. But that didn't seem like it would be enough to deal with Iino. No matter how powerful a weapon was, it didn't mean anything if it couldn't hit. Its effectiveness would also be hindered by Gerbera's missing legs.

"Majima, I know this one is your strongest trump card, but no matter how you put it, it's unreasonable to rely on it now."

It was natural she'd think this way, but I had something else on my mind entirely. Gerbera was...well, Gerbera. That was why I felt something was out of place. Katou and Rose got along really well, something Iino had no way of knowing. Despite this, Katou hadn't rushed to Rose's side when she slammed into the cliffside. Instead, she had run to Gerbera first.

It looked like Katou had lost her composure, but if so, she would have gone to Rose right away. Since she hadn't, didn't it mean the complete opposite, then? Katou wasn't panicking. She had calmly analyzed the situation with a cool head and then taken action. The reason she had gone over to Gerbera was because she had a clear purpose in doing so.

"With this, it's over," Iino declared, breaking into a sprint toward Gerbera.

Gerbera responded by swinging the manamobile with all her strength. There was no way such a crude attack would hit the fleet-footed Skanda. That was why Gerbera wasn't aiming for Iino to begin with.

"Wha—?!"

The manamobile left Gerbera's hand, flew over Shiran and Kei's heads, and collided into the cliffside hanging over the road. Iino had yet to get close to Gerbera, so she had no way of stopping it.

The cliffside was already brittle enough that it had almost crumbled when Rose crashed into it. Now the powerful Great White Spider had thrown a sturdy vehicle at it with all her strength. The force of the impact was terrifying, shattering both the vehicle and the cliffside into pieces. As a result, a natural phenomenon occurred, one that had stopped us on our journey many times over now—a landslide. A torrent of rocks and dirt came pouring down onto the mountain road.

Naturally, the Skanda wouldn't take any damage from this. With her speed, it would be easy for her to get out of the way. Yes. It would be ever so easy—for her, that is.

"Wh-Why...?"

Iino was completely taken aback. She was definitely remembering what Katou had just told her.

“Please don’t forget. Just as you said, I’m no more than a normal human. I have no strength. I can’t fight. I have no means of surviving if something happens to me.”

“No way!”

Iino cried out and turned around. Katou was standing there, holding her hand out and smiling. I couldn’t suppress a shudder at the thought of what was going through Katou’s mind. We couldn’t escape Iino just by causing a landslide. Iino was intent on at least capturing me. But in this situation, with a fragile girl who possessed no strength about to die right in front of her, what would she do?

“Y-You idiot!”

Iino didn’t hesitate. She broke into a sprint with all the power of the Skanda. However...Iino had misunderstood. Katou certainly lacked the strength to directly take part in any fighting, but she was in no way weak.

Her weapon was her resolve. Her way wasn’t justice, but that didn’t make her evil. Katou Mana was merely acting in earnest desperation. That was why the hand she held out wasn’t seeking Iino’s help. The bracelet on her wrist was a magic tool I had given her for her own self-defense. The gem embedded in it was an imitation flash runestone. It could only be used once to create a non-lethal blinding light.

“I’m not opposed to taking advantage of others’ weaknesses either.”

That was what Katou had said, and she was doing just that with Iino. A blinding white light enveloped the crumbling cliffside.

“W-Wait! H-Hang on!”

Iino never could’ve guessed that the girl she was trying to save would launch a surprise attack on her. She ended up plunging into the light.

“Y-You’ve gotta be kidding?!”

Thus, the Skanda fell with a scream.

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